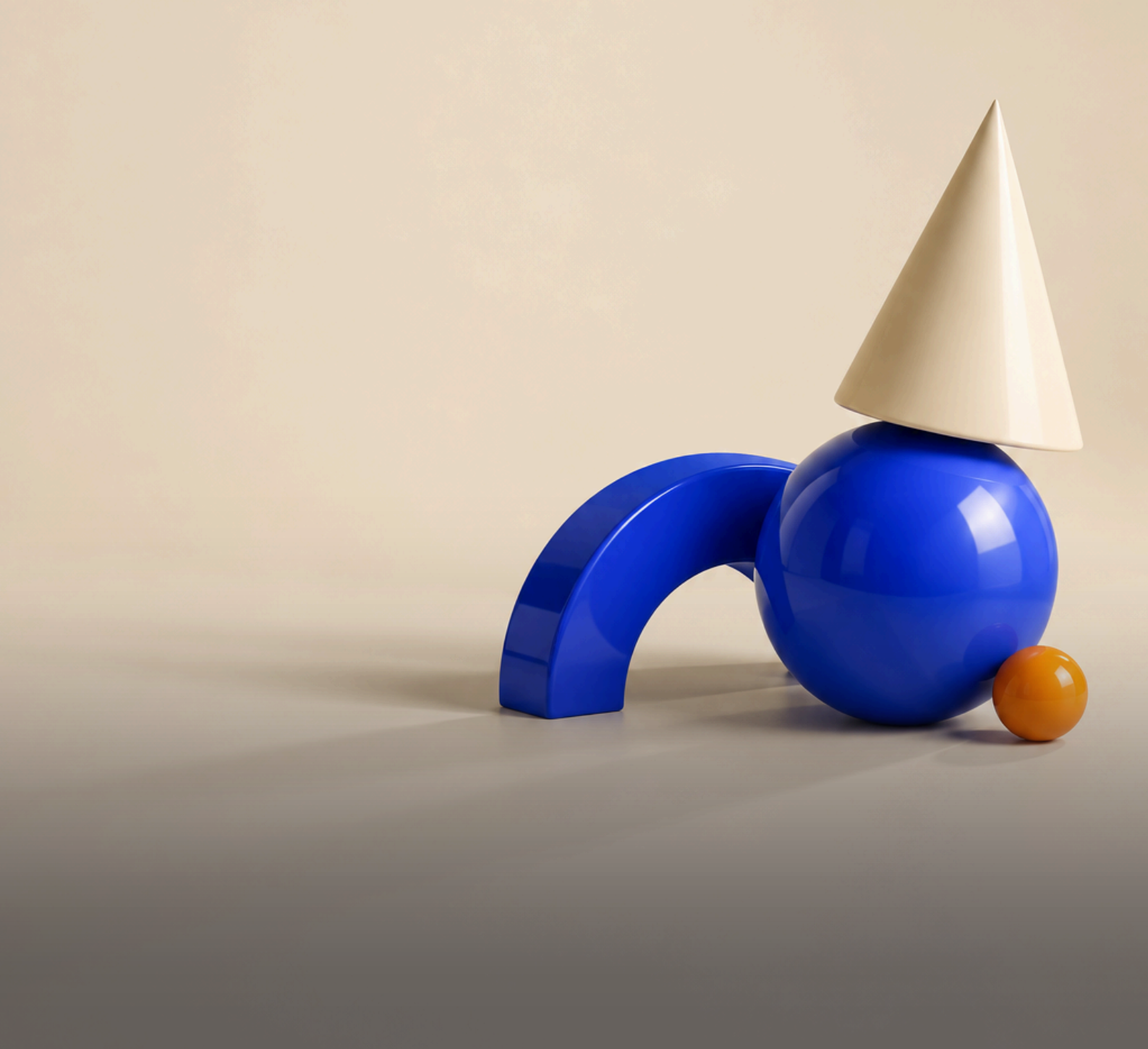


Building a Brand People Actually Remember

KILN BRAND STUDIO

A field guide to memory, distinctive assets and the patience to stay the same

Six things to keep

Memory, not awareness 4

Category entry points 7

Distinctive brand assets 10

Run a distinctive asset audit 13

Names and voice 16

Stay the same on purpose 21

Building a Brand People Actually Remember

A field guide to memory, distinctive assets and the patience to stay the same.

Most small brands are not disliked. They are simply not thought of. When someone needs what you sell, a short list of names arrives in their head within a second or two, and if yours is not on it, the quality of your product never gets a hearing. This guide is about getting onto that list and staying there.

It is written for founders, marketers and small creative teams who do not have a television budget and do not need one. The ideas come from the marketing science of the last two decades, especially the work of Byron Sharp and Jenni Romaniuk at the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute, translated into decisions you can make on an ordinary Tuesday afternoon: which colour to keep, which phrase to repeat, what to stop changing.

Every brand in these pages is invented. The bakery, the bike shop and the accounting practice are composites we use to show the method, not case studies with results attached. Where we name a book, it is so you can read the original, not so we can borrow its authority.

01

Memory, not awareness

Awareness asks whether people have heard of you. Memory asks whether you come to mind at the moment it matters, unprompted, with the right associations attached. The second is harder, more useful and much cheaper to build than most teams assume, because it rewards repetition rather than reinvention.

Picture the moment of choice. Someone is standing in a train station at twenty to eight, needing coffee before a meeting. They do not compare every café in the city. Two or three options surface, the nearest and the most familiar, and they pick one. Marketing scientists call the likelihood of being one of those options mental availability. Byron Sharp's How Brands Grow made the term popular, and it is the most practical definition of a brand we know: the sum of the memories that make you easy to think of and easy to recognise.

That definition changes what you measure. An awareness survey asks "have you heard of us?", and a yes feels like success. But plenty of brands are known and never chosen, because the memory is thin: a name with nothing attached, or a name attached to the wrong situation. A memorable brand has a name linked to many relevant moments, plus a set of sensory cues that let people spot it in a crowded feed, on a shelf or in a list of search results without reading a word.

Three jobs, one brand

Memory work splits into jobs that feel similar and are not. It helps to name them separately, because a team that does one well often assumes it has done all three.

Be thought of.	Link the brand to the situations in which people buy, so it comes to mind without a prompt.
Be recognised.	Build cues (a colour, a shape, a phrase) that let people identify you in a second, even half asleep.
Be easy to buy.	Once you are remembered, be findable: in stock, in search, one click away, open when they arrive.

The first job is about category entry points, which the next chapter covers. The second is about distinctive brand assets, which take up most of this guide. The third, which Sharp calls physical availability, sits outside branding, but it undoes everything else when it is neglected. A brand that people remember and cannot find is a brand that trains them to buy something else.

> **REMEMBER**
> Most of your future customers are not paying attention to you today. Memory is built in the background, through many small exposures, for people who are not yet in the market and will not be for months.

Why small brands drift

Small teams have a particular weakness here, and it is not budget. It is boredom. The founder sees the logo two hundred times a day. The designer has redrawn the packaging in her head a dozen times. The person running social media is tired of the palette by March. Inside the company the brand feels overexposed long before anyone outside has noticed it at all.

So the brand drifts. A new campaign gets a new typeface because it "needs its own personality". The illustration style changes with each freelancer. The tagline is rewritten every spring. Each change is reasonable on its own. Together they mean the customer never sees the same brand twice, and memory has nothing to hold on to.

> **Your customers are not tired of your brand. You are.**

The remedy is not to stop creating. It is to separate what must stay fixed from what can change freely. Campaigns, headlines, offers and seasonal ideas should be fresh. The cues that carry your identity (the colour, the mark, the phrase, the character) should be almost boringly stable. Fresh ideas, wrapped in the same signals, every single time. That is the pattern behind nearly every brand you can picture with your eyes closed, and it is just as available to a three person studio as it is to a multinational.

Category entry points

People do not shop for categories. They shop for situations: a gift for a host, a quick lunch, a tool that will not crash before a deadline. The brands that win are linked in memory to many of those situations, not to one clever sentence about themselves.

The idea of category entry points comes from Jenni Romaniuk and her colleagues at the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute. A category entry point is a cue in the buyer's head at the moment they start to look: a need, a time, a place, a person, a feeling. "Something to bring to dinner on Saturday." "Lunch I can eat at my desk." "Software my accountant will accept." Each one is a door into the category. Your brand is either linked to that door in memory or it is not.

The useful consequence is that you can grow by being linked to more doors, and to busier ones, rather than by trying to say something more impressive about yourself. A brand linked to one situation competes for a thin slice of moments. A brand linked to ten is in the running far more often, and usually without spending more, because the links are built by what it already says and shows.

Worked example: Marrow & Rye

Marrow & Rye is an invented neighbourhood bakery with two shops and a small wholesale round. Its owners describe it as "naturally leavened bread, made slowly". That is true, and it is entirely about the bakery. It does not describe a single moment in a customer's week.

When the team sat down to list entry points, they asked who buys, when, where, with whom and why. The list they came up with was longer and more ordinary than their brand story:

Saturday breakfast.	Something better than the supermarket loaf for a slow weekend morning.
Bringing something.	A host gift that is not another bottle of wine or bunch of flowers.
Feeding guests.	A centrepiece for a table that needs to look generous with little effort.
Desk lunch.	A sandwich that still tastes good at one o'clock.
A small treat.	A pastry on the walk home, alone, for no particular reason.

None of these is about slow fermentation. All of them are reasons someone might think of a bakery. The team kept the story for people who ask, and started building links to the situations instead: a Saturday loaf sold only at weekends, a boxed "bring something" bundle by the till, a chalkboard in the window that reads "Lunch that lasts until one". Each is a small, repeated connection between the brand and a moment. None needed a new logo.

How to find your own

Five questions surface most entry points in an afternoon:

- Who is buying, and who are they buying for? Gifts, families and teams open different doors than solo purchases.
- When does the need arise? Time of day, day of the week, season, life event, deadline.
- Where are they when it starts? At home, at work, travelling, already in a shop, scrolling late at night.
- What are they trying to feel, or to avoid feeling? Relief, generosity, competence, not looking cheap, not being late.
- What else is involved? The thing your product is used with, before or after.

Answer them with customers, not only with the team. Read reviews, support emails, the searches that bring people to your site and the words people use when they recommend you to a friend. Look for the situation sentence, not the praise. "Perfect for taking to my mother in law's" tells you far more than "amazing bread".

Then choose. You cannot own every door. Pick the three to five that many people pass through often, that fit what you genuinely do well, and where no competitor is already firmly linked. From then on, make each piece of communication connect the brand to one of them, using the same distinctive assets every time, so the memory has both a situation and a face.

> **TIP**
> Write each chosen entry point as a sentence a customer might say to themselves, then test every headline against it. "Lunch that lasts until one" passes. "Crafted with passion" links to no moment at all.

Distinctive brand assets

A distinctive asset is anything that triggers your brand in someone's mind without your name being shown: a colour, a shape, a character, a sound, a phrase. Built well, assets do the recognition work for you, in a fraction of a second, in places where your logo is too small to read.

Jenni Romaniuk's book Building Distinctive Brand Assets is the clearest treatment of the subject, and its central idea is simple enough to use straight away. An asset is only an asset if people link it to your brand. Your chosen colour is not a distinctive asset because it appears in your guidelines. It becomes one when a stranger sees that colour, out of context, and thinks of you.

Romaniuk judges an asset on two qualities. Fame: how many people in your market link it to you. Uniqueness: whether they link it to you alone, or to competitors as well. Both matter. A famous but shared cue, like the generic leaf green of eco products, points to the whole category instead of to you. A unique but unknown cue is a promise that has not been paid yet.

The types worth considering

Colour.	The fastest cue to register from a distance, and the easiest to lose by sharing it with the category leader.
Shape.	A bottle outline, a logo silhouette, a recurring frame or crop. Strong because it survives without colour.
Character.	A mascot, a drawn figure, a recurring person. Characters carry feeling and age well when kept consistent.
Sound.	A short audio sting, a voice, a few notes. Underused by small brands, and more relevant with every video you post.
Phrase.	A tagline or a recurring turn of words. It only works when repeated far longer than feels natural.
Typography.	An unusual typeface used everywhere. Recognisable over time, but rarely enough on its own.

You do not need all of them. Most memorable small brands rely on two or three assets used relentlessly, rather than a full kit used occasionally. Choose for your situation. A brand that lives in social video should think hard about sound and motion. A brand sold on a crowded shelf needs colour and shape that read from two metres away. A service firm that mostly sends proposals and reports can let its typography, its layout and one recurring phrase do much of the work.

Worked example: Spoke & Sundry

Spoke & Sundry is an invented bike repair shop in a city with a dozen others. Its first logo was a gear wheel in dark green, which describes the category rather than the shop: half its competitors use a cog, and several use green. When the owners looked at a year of their own materials, the most distinctive thing they had was an accident. A mechanic had started doodling a small grinning bicycle bell on every repair receipt, and regulars kept mentioning it.

They made the bell the brand. It went on the van, on the sticker every serviced bike leaves with, on the shop sign and in every social post, always the same drawing, always in one tangerine orange that no other shop in town used. The cog was quietly retired. Nothing about the service changed. What changed is that the shop now had a face people could spot from across the street.

Notice what they did not do. They did not commission a mascot, write a backstory for the bell or redraw it to look more professional. The value of the doodle was that customers already knew it, and polishing it would have spent some of that knowledge. Their only rules were about use: the bell appears on everything, at a size where it can be seen, in the same orange, drawn the same way. A brand asset is built less by design than by the discipline of using it.

Assets need a context

One more idea from the research is worth carrying with you. An asset works best when it appears where the buying happens, at the moment the entry point is active. The bell on a bike sticker meets a cyclist in the street. The same bell in a newsletter footer meets nobody in particular. Place your strongest cues where the decision is made: on the packaging, the search result thumbnail, the delivery box, the first frame of the video.

> **WARNING**
> Never test an asset by asking the team whether they like it. Show it to people outside the company with the brand name removed and ask who it belongs to. If they name a competitor, you have learned something cheap and important.

04

Run a distinctive asset audit

Before you invent anything new, find out what you already own. An audit takes a week of part-time effort and usually reveals one strong asset you have neglected and two you have been quietly diluting.

The audit has two halves. First an inventory: collect every place the brand appears and list the cues that repeat. Then a test: put each cue in front of people who know your category and see whether they connect it to you. The result is a short list of assets to protect, to build, to pair or to drop, and a much calmer conversation about the next redesign.

Who runs it matters less than who is kept out of the judging. One person should own the board and the notes. The founder and the designer of the current identity should help gather material, then step back while outsiders answer. They are the people least able to see the brand fresh, through no fault of their own.

Running it

1	**Gather everything.** Pull a year of social posts, packaging, emails, ads, signage, slides and web pages onto one wall or board.
2	**List the repeats.** Note every colour, shape, character, phrase, sound and typeface that appears more than a handful of times.
3	**Strip the name.** For each cue, make a version with every brand name, logo and product shot removed.
4	**Ask outsiders.** Show each cue to a small group of people in your market (customers, not colleagues) and ask which brand comes to mind. Write the answers down word for word.
5	**Sort the results.** Place each cue in the table that follows and decide, as a team, what to do with it.

A handful of conversations will not give you a robust score, and it does not need to. You are looking for strong signals: a cue that most people attach to you without hesitation, or one that keeps being credited to a rival. Treat the answers as a direction, not a measurement. If you later have the budget for a proper survey, the inventory you built here becomes its brief, and you will already know which cues are worth paying to measure.

Sorting what you find

Ask two questions of every cue: do people link it to us, and do they link it only to us?

What you found	What it means	What to do
Most people name you, few name anyone else	A working asset, both known and yours	Protect it. Use it everywhere and change nothing
Few people name you, nobody names a rival	Yours, but not known yet	Build it. Use it more often and more prominently
People name you and your competitors	A category cue, not a brand cue	Never use it alone. Pair it with a unique asset
People name a competitor	Someone else owns it	Drop it, or change it until it is clearly yours
Nobody names anyone	A decoration, not an asset	Decide whether it is worth years of building

Most teams find their results uncomfortable in the same way. The asset they are proudest of, often a recent logo refresh, barely registers, while something old and slightly embarrassing (a hand-drawn mark, a phrase from the first year) is the one people actually remember. Trust the outsiders. The audit is not a vote on taste. It is a map of what already exists in your customers' heads, which is the only place a brand lives. Write the results on one page, with each cue, its verdict and the next action, and keep it beside the brand guidelines. It will settle more design arguments in the coming year than any moodboard.

> **NOTE**
> Repeat the audit once a year with the same method and the same cues. The change from one year to the next tells you whether your consistency is working far better than any single result can.

05

Names and voice

A name and a voice are assets you use in every sentence, often without noticing. They are also the two things small teams change most casually. This chapter is about choosing them carefully once, then leaving them alone long enough to work.

Naming

Good names are not clever. They are easy to say, easy to spell after hearing once, and different from everything else in the category. A descriptive name ("Northfield Accounting Services") is easy to understand and hard to remember, because it sounds like the category. An invented or borrowed word ("Kiln", "Marrow & Rye") takes a moment longer to learn and is far easier to own, because nobody else is standing on it.

Then do the dull part early: a trademark search in the markets you sell to, and a check on the web address and social handles. A name you cannot protect is a name you will eventually have to change, and every year of memory you built for it goes with it.

Voice

Voice is how the brand sounds when it writes and speaks. For memory, the useful part of voice is not the adjectives in a guidelines document ("warm, witty, human") but the specific, repeated choices a reader can notice. Which words you always use and which you never use. How long your sentences run. Whether you greet people. What you call your customers. These choices become recognisable through repetition, exactly as a colour does.

The most memorable voice element is usually a phrase: a recurring sign-off, a line printed on every receipt, a consistent way of naming your products. Spoke & Sundry, the invented bike shop, ends every message with "Ride on, the bell's ringing." It is slightly silly. It is also the line customers quote back when they recommend the shop, which is the only test that matters.

Keeping a phrase that long takes a written rule, because every new hire and every agency will want to improve it. The simplest tool we know is a voice sheet of three short lists, pinned wherever copy gets written. Here is the one Marrow & Rye uses, shortened:

Words we use.	Loaf, bake, Saturday, neighbour, table, "bring something".
Words we avoid.	Artisan, crafted, passion, journey, elevate, curated.
Phrases we repeat.	"Baked this morning." "Lunch that lasts until one."

05 Names and voice

Run every candidate through four plain tests before anyone is allowed to fall in love with it:

01

The phone test

Say it once over a bad line. Could the listener type it into a search bar?

02

The shout test

Call it across a noisy room. Does it survive, or turn into another word?

03

The category test

Search it next to your category. Is anyone already close to it?

04

The ten year test

Will it still fit if you add a product, move city or double the team?

We stopped writing a new tagline every spring. The old one only started working in its third year.

Ines Okafor, co-owner of Marrow & Rye (fictional)

The second list does more work than the first. Banned words are where a brand stops sounding like everyone else in its category, because every category has a vocabulary its marketers reach for without thinking. Find yours by reading five competitors' homepages in a row and circling every word that appears on three of them.

Exact wording, before and after

Voice is easiest to understand in a single sentence rewritten. Here is a fictional accounting practice, Hollis & Pine, describing the same service twice. The first version could belong to any firm in the country: "We provide comprehensive, tailored accounting solutions to help small businesses achieve their financial goals." The second could only be them: "We do your books every Friday, answer the phone ourselves, and tell you in plain words what you can afford."

The second version is longer, and it is better for memory in three ways. It names a habit (every Friday) that can become a recurring phrase. It makes a promise customers can repeat to a friend. And it carries a recognisable rhythm, three short clauses with the plainest word at the end, which the practice now uses in every headline. Rhythm is an asset too, though it takes a patient writer to protect it.

Try the exercise on your own homepage. Copy your opening sentence, then ask whether a competitor could publish it unchanged. If they could, rewrite it with one habit, one promise and one plain word that only you would use. Do the same for your email sign-off and your invoice footer. Small surfaces repeated thousands of times build more memory than one brilliant campaign line used once.

Stay the same on purpose

Novelty feels like progress to the people making the work. To everyone else, seeing you occasionally between a thousand other messages, it looks like a different company each time. Consistency is not a lack of ideas. It is the frame that lets your ideas be credited to you.

The rebrand temptation

When growth stalls, the most visible lever in the building is the identity. A new logo is concrete, it can be presented in a meeting, and it feels like action. Rebrands do sometimes make sense: a merger, a name you legally cannot keep, a reputation you need to leave behind, or an identity that genuinely holds no distinctive asset worth saving. But "people do not notice us" is rarely solved by giving them something new not to notice. The beliefs behind most rebrands look like this next to what memory actually needs.

Myth

- A rebrand will make us more memorable, because people will finally notice something new.
- Customers are bored of our look and want to see something fresh from us.
- Every campaign deserves its own visual identity, or it will feel like last year.
- Strong brands constantly reinvent themselves to stay relevant.

Fact

- A rebrand resets memory to zero and starts years of work again from the beginning.
- Customers barely notice your look. The people bored of it work in your building.
- A campaign can change its idea completely while keeping every core asset in place.
- The brands you can picture with your eyes closed have kept their core cues for years.

Fixed and flexible

The practical way to hold the line is to divide every element of the brand into two columns and write them down. Fixed: the core assets that carry recognition, such as the main colour, the mark, the character, the recurring phrase and the primary typeface. Flexible: everything that can change without costing memory, such as headlines, photography subjects, offers, seasonal accent colours and campaign ideas. A designer who knows the four things that cannot move is free to be bold with everything else, and the work arrives already recognisable.

> **KEY TAKEAWAY**
> The rule for every collaborator is new ideas, same signals. Brief what is fixed before you brief the campaign.

Most inconsistency is not a creative decision at all. It happens at eleven at night, when someone needs a slide and opens last year's deck because the new template is hard to find. So treat consistency as a production problem. Put the fixed assets into the tools people already use: document templates, social post frames, the email signature, the proposal layout. Keep one shared folder of current versions and delete the old ones. The easiest thing to make should also be the on-brand thing.

When an asset genuinely has to change, evolve rather than replace. Change one asset at a time and keep the most famous cue untouched while you modernise the others. Spoke & Sundry ran the old cog beside the new bell for a full season before dropping it, and nobody wrote in to ask whether the shop had been sold. That silence is what a successful change sounds like.

A 90-day consistency plan

Consistency takes deliberate work to install, and it needs one owner: not a committee, but a named person who keeps the board, chases the gaps and can send work back when the fixed assets are missing. The plan below assumes a few hours of their time each week and no new budget.

The plan will not make you famous in ninety days. Memory builds over years, through repetition in front of people who are mostly not paying attention. What a quarter can do is stop the leaks: the off-brand slide deck, the freelancer's new illustration style, the campaign that borrowed a competitor's colour. Once the leaks stop, everything you publish adds to the same memory instead of starting a new one.

Thirteen weeks, one owner, one shared board:

01

Week 1: Gather a year of materials on one board and list every repeated cue.

02

Week 2: Test the cues with outsiders, names removed, and sort them with the audit table.

03

Week 3: Write the one page brand sheet: fixed assets, flexible elements, voice, entry points.

04

Week 5: Fix the visible gaps and rebuild the templates the team uses every week.

05

Week 8: Brief every freelancer and partner with the sheet before their next job.

06

Week 13: Rerun the outsider test on the same cues and plan the next quarter.

Keeping it going

After the first quarter, keep three rituals. A monthly look at everything published, laid out together, asking only whether a stranger would see one brand. A yearly rerun of the outsider test with the same cues. And a standing rule that any proposal to change a fixed asset must come with a reason from the audit, not from boredom.

None of this is glamorous, and that is the point. The brands people remember are rarely the ones that tried hardest to be interesting. They chose a few signals early, connected them to real moments in their customers' lives, and then showed up looking the same for longer than felt comfortable.

Pick your signals. Then be the most patient brand in your category.

Find out which parts of your brand people already remember

In two weeks we inventory your brand, test every cue with people outside the company and hand you a one page brand sheet your whole team can use.

Book a brand memory audit