

THE VSSL BRAND-FIRST METHODOLOGY

How SaaS Organizations
Can Accelerate Customer
Growth and Generate
Long-Term Value



Branding has always been a key component of successful B2C companies, but for many B2B organizations, branding is often overlooked and underutilized. With a Brand-First approach, B2B companies can gain significant benefits by making consistent, strategic, and deliberate brand decisions, improving how clients interact with you at every stage of the marketing funnel, and generating both new customers and long-term value.

At VSSL, we are strong proponents of a Brand-First methodology. With our approach, companies can:

STAND OUT

in their market with a distinct, ownable position

ATTRACT

the right customers by aligning messaging and positioning to their specific needs

GAIN

maximum value by integrating brand strategy across your marketing funnel

DELIVER

personalized creative and bold digital marketing experiences for their audiences

CAPTURE

continuous, sustained growth for long-term success

Studies have shown¹ that businesses that put their brand first can capture five times more volume, command a 13% price premium, and are four times more likely to grow value share compared to other brands. They also outperform the S&P 500.²

Best of all, the momentum you gain as a result of adopting a Brand-First approach continually builds on itself, reducing friction for future marketing efforts and dramatically accelerating growth.





WHAT IS A BRAND?

According to HubSpot, “a brand is a feature or set of features³ that distinguish one organization from another.” It’s more than a logo or corporate colors. The word “brand” encompasses all the reasons why someone might choose one company, product, or service over another. It’s the reaction people have upon hearing your company’s name or seeing your logo or products. It influences existing or prospective customers, employees, investors, advisors, and anyone else who engages with your brand.

All companies have their own individual history, appearance, way of speaking, motivators, values, and strengths, just as people do. Those sometimes nuanced characteristics are what make companies unique and give them a way to differentiate themselves from their competitors. In fact, 64% of women and 68% of men⁴ say that they have felt an emotional connection to a brand. Creating an emotional connection with customers and prospects is how businesses are successful. And there are a lot of ways to do it.

Elements of a brand include, but are not limited to:

Positioning: Mission statement, vision, core beliefs, brand pillars, archetype(s), value proposition

Visual Identity: Logo, colors, typography, photography, illustration

Messaging: Tone of voice, content, public relations

Product: Purpose, UI/UX, functionality, technology

Culture: Hiring practices, values, DEI, benefits, internal comms, office/location

It's easy to overlook many important brand elements when first starting out. And for most companies, it's ok to prioritize. But it's essential to be aware of all of the choices we make on a daily basis — sometimes without much thought — that have a significant impact on shaping a brand. Without careful reflection on each decision, attention to the details, and an overarching strategy to guide your choices, the brand you inadvertently develop may not accurately reflect the company's purpose, resonate with consumers, or attract the right talent.

In a Brand-First organization, that brand consideration is done up front, as a foundational element, and it's the lens through which every marketing endeavor is viewed.

We recommend starting with a laser-focused positioning strategy rooted in consumer insights and authenticity. An all-too-common error is to start with a great product, then move straight to a logo and simple website so teams can start selling as soon as possible. In fact, positioning should drive everything, including how you sell your product/service, how you scale the business, which industries to target with sales, and what kind of people you hire. This is hugely important because brands that are presented consistently see an average revenue increase of 10–20%.⁵



WHAT IS BRAND FIRST?

Brand First refers to a strategy where the brand is prioritized above other aspects of your product or service. This approach focuses on creating a strong, consistent brand image and experience for customers, which is seen as the foundation for building a successful business. In a Brand-First approach, all business decisions, marketing efforts, and customer interactions are guided by the brand's values, messaging, and goals.

When strategic business decisions are made with the brand in mind, it continues to strengthen and generate momentum. Companies can grow and evolve, gaining brand power and value without losing their identity.

This approach aims to build a strong, recognizable brand that customers trust and prefer over competitors. Just as important, it helps marketing teams make faster, more effective decisions and delivers continuous, sustainable growth for long-term success.

COMMON PITFALLS

Companies often start out with the best brand intentions, but their focus on the brand is easy to set aside, which happens all the time. In our experience, marketers are time-starved, responsible for multiple roles, and consumed with feeding the voracious sales machine a growing supply of high-quality leads. It's these immediate, time-sensitive needs that marketers tend to focus on, rather than something amorphous, like the brand, which, after all, has no deadline, is difficult to measure, and whose results can seem far in the future.

Companies need to prioritize their focus on their brand to realize gains from the effort. The CEO and other business leaders need to understand the long-term value that can be derived from a strong brand. Without that buy-in from leadership, it's difficult to get traction. Additionally, someone on the marketing team needs to be empowered and held accountable for ensuring the brand is considered in every initiative.

Without these resources, it can be very challenging to stay the course when it comes to your brand.



ADVANTAGES OF A BRAND-FIRST APPROACH

With your team aligned on the power and importance of your brand, let's dive into the advantages of a Brand-First approach, and outline why we recommend this approach for our B2B clients.



1

STAND OUT IN THE MARKET WITH A DISTINCT, OWNABLE POSITION

One significant benefit of a Brand-First approach is that it helps B2B companies stand out from their competitors. Let's face it — most B2B startups are a dime a dozen. They're constantly popping up and tend to focus solely on product development and sales. But the ones who are succeeding have a strong brand to help them differentiate themselves and chart a path for exponential growth. Brands like Zendesk, Slack, Square, Drift, and OpenAI each clearly prioritize their branding, and brand-focused startups like Stripe, Canva, and Klarna are classified as unicorns due to their explosive growth.

By creating an identity that's based on your company's brand purpose, marketers can also build trust with their audience. A strong brand helps customers recognize the company and become loyal followers. And as customers continue to come back, they will be more likely to purchase additional services or products.



VSSL

BRAND PURPOSE

Your brand purpose is the reason you went into business, why your product or service was created in the first place. If this isn't already articulated in your company's elevator pitch, there's usually a strong purpose behind the product or service⁶ that can be refined, broadened, and recrafted into a mission statement, which speaks to who your company is and why it exists (beyond profit).

Knowing your purpose is the key to everything else. It's foundational to your brand, and it ensures that every other brand touchpoint you create links back to—and builds off of—your brand.

A well-defined brand purpose with ownable beliefs and differentiators will give people a reason to believe in your brand over your competitors. And it's that belief that will allow your company to continuously generate new customers and generate long-term value.

Once you have a thorough understanding of your brand purpose, you can start to develop other elements of your messaging platform, like defining your vision, brand pillars, core beliefs, and brand archetypes.⁷

All of these have a huge impact on every aspect of how you express your brand — from your logo and copy style to how you scale the business with future product developments or hiring practices. With a focused, authentic, relevant, and differentiated brand positioning in place, you can start to develop how your brand looks.



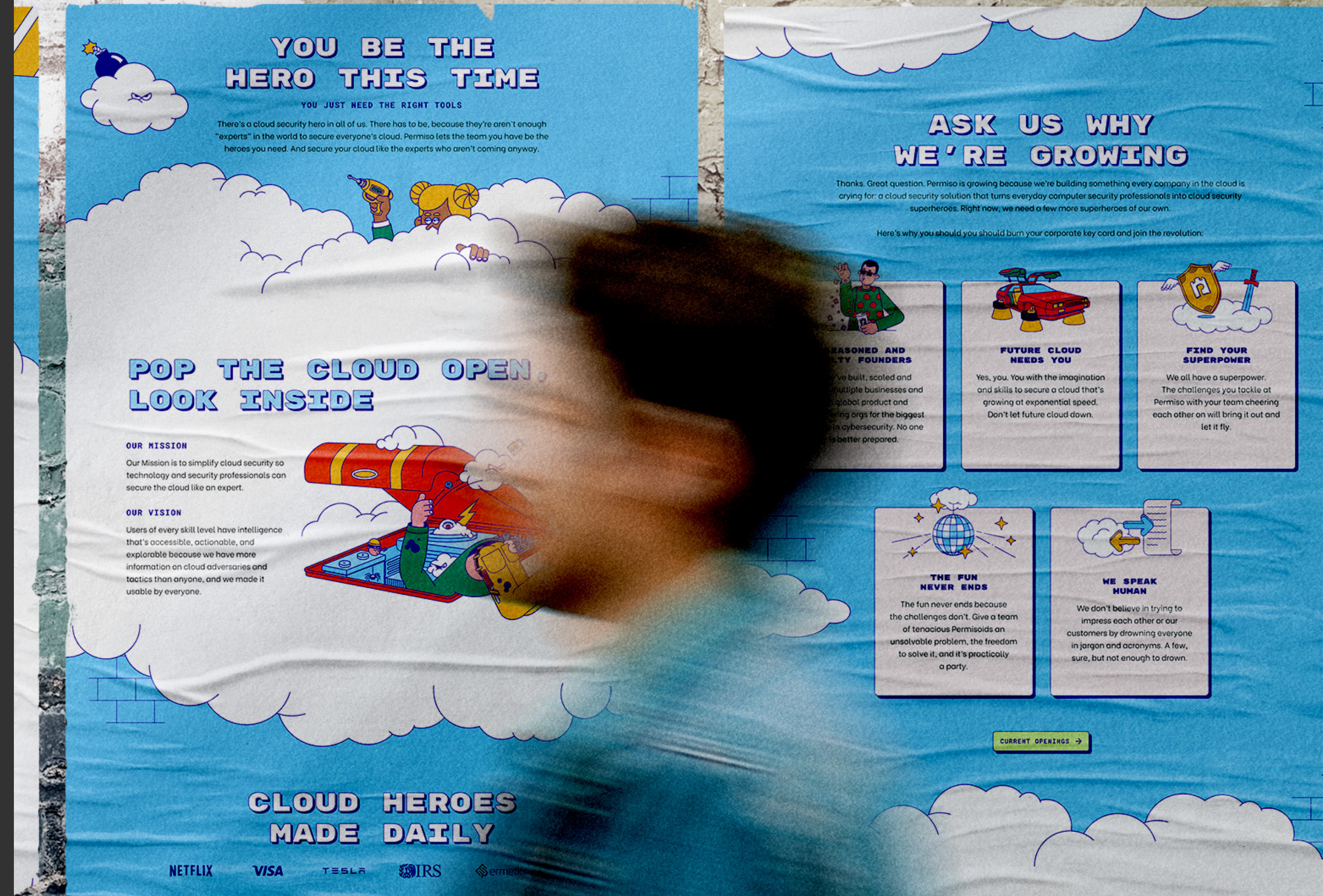
CASE STUDY

Permiso is a cybersecurity company that was created by experts who know how to find the bad guys, and they built an easy-to-use product that quickly tells users, in plain English, what's happening in their cloud that requires their attention. But Permiso's branding was narrowly defined and didn't convey the unique value of their offering. Permiso approached VSSL to help them build a brand that would communicate their product's benefits and differentiate them from others in their space.

VSSL started with positioning, combining the ideas of trustworthy, simple, and fun into mission and vision statements, core beliefs, and brand pillars. The focus throughout all of these was empowerment and accessibility. VSSL sought to invite people in, not scare them away.

The brand voice embodied the tone of the positioning. VSSL wanted it to feel like Permiso was speaking directly to normal people — not just cloud “experts” — with a tone that is simple, conversational, and clever. The visual identity combined bold colors and typography with a simple, fun illustration style to create a brand identity that couldn't be more different from anything else in cloud security.

The rebrand has been a huge success for Permiso. There has been an 82% increase in organic searches and a 135% boost in organic social engagement. VSSL succeeded in refining Permiso's branding to better communicate its product's benefits and differentiate them from other companies in their space with a brand that is trustworthy, simple, and fun.





Brand Platform

OUR VISION

Kyriba sees a future where liquidity will be re-cast as a more strategic financial lever for CFOs. With increased financial scope and data-driven intelligence, the active liquidity model will open up new enterprise

OUR POSITION

Kyriba



ATTRACT THE RIGHT CUSTOMERS BY ALIGNING BRAND MESSAGING AND POSITIONING TO THEIR SPECIFIC NEEDS

When you know who you’re targeting and understand their needs and emotional motivators, you can ensure your brand messaging is tailored to where they are in their journey. Your messaging is made up of the primary themes you’ll use to communicate with your audience, but to be successful, you’ll need to identify your audience, have a clear value proposition, and define your tone of voice.



IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE WITH ICPS [IDEAL CUSTOMER PROFILES]

We strongly recommend conducting interviews with existing or prospective customers as early as possible in your brand development process so you can understand as much as possible about the challenges they face, how they purchase, what they value, and how they might use your product or service. It's surprising how insightful those conversations can be if you ask the right questions. All of the information that gets collected in those conversations will be used to create buyer personas, and these insights can have an outsized impact across everything: your positioning, your product UI/UX, campaign creative, and more. Having a clear understanding of your ICPs is one of the most powerful ways to ensure your brand engages with your audience in a relevant and effective way.

DEFINE A CLEAR VALUE PROPOSITION

Your value proposition is the distillation of what your company does — what it is you bring to the market, and how you make your customers' lives better. For example, many B2B companies have a value prop based on the innovation of their software solution. To be effective, they will aim to reinforce this in every touchpoint they have with customers or the broader market.

Having a clear understanding of your value proposition underpins your brand messaging. It unlocks the tone of voice and specific vocabulary you can use when communicating.

SPECIFY YOUR TONE OF VOICE

You can take this a step further by leaning on your brand purpose and brand pillars to develop a unique tone of voice. For example, at VSSL, we wanted our brand to feel authentic to who we are and what we do: a small, scrappy group of marketers passionate about creating killer work.

We looked at what made us different from other agencies. We are located right on the water and influenced by the sailors and fishermen on the docks and in our building. We were founded to bring passion to our work, not just follow in the footsteps of other agencies. We never settle for the obvious solution and are always looking for ways to do unexpected things for our clients. We are who we are, and we don't want to fit into the box of a "creative agency." This gives us a very different brand voice that reflects our disruptive spirit, allows us to operate differently than other agencies, and gives us the opportunity to be super creative with our design. We are not just another agency, nor do we want to be.

Authentic messaging that treats your prospects as real people and is anchored deeply to your brand is a critical component of our Brand-First methodology. It not only delivers leads, it earns customers for life.



Free eBook

15-Minute Guide to

CASE STUDY: KYRIBA PPC CAMPAIGNS

Kyriba is the global leader in cloud treasury and finance solutions, helping their 2,000+ global clients transform how they activate and protect cash and liquidity. Kyriba wanted to expand its paid media efforts to increase both lead quality and sales opportunities.

Working with the Kyriba team, VSSL developed ICPs for key individuals typically involved in the purchasing committee for a SaaS fintech solution and outlined their needs at specific stages of the buying journey. We then mapped content offers to these stages and audiences, creating an emotional connection to their specific challenges. Through strategic audience targeting and the creation of engaging sponsored content, these LinkedIn campaigns surpassed LinkedIn's own benchmark KPIs.

In North America, the average growth of leads per month was +102%. Based on this performance, the North American campaign was successfully scaled to Northern Europe, Southern Europe, and Asia-Pacific, where the form completion rate was 400% higher than the industry benchmark, and the average cost per lead was 450% lower than the benchmark.

From the beginning, VSSL successfully scaled this effort into various regions and improved on the already industry-topping performance as they expanded globally. VSSL achieved results that blew away LinkedIn's benchmarks for similar industries advertising on their platform.

kyriba®

eBOOK

Optimizing payments during an ERP cloud migration

A Kyriba quick reference guide

Optimizing During an Cloud Migr

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A 10-Minute Handbook to Decrease ERP Migration Time & Costs

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Handbook to
Migration

VSSL

3

GAIN MAXIMUM VALUE BY INTEGRATING BRAND STRATEGY ACROSS YOUR MARKETING FUNNEL

With a Brand-First approach, your team has an innate understanding of your brand, since every marketing activity considers brand strategy first, as part of its execution. Over time, this allows your team to be more nimble, efficient, and consistent.

At the top of the funnel, when your audience is just becoming aware they have a problem, you'll want to make sure your content speaks to their current needs. In the middle of the funnel, when they're in the consideration stage, you'll want to be more explicit about how your product or service works best and provides the most value. At the bottom of the funnel, when they're in the decision stage, testimonials and case studies can be effective in convincing your audience to select your solution.

Ensure that every touchpoint in every stage of the funnel is aligned with your brand strategy. Leverage your ICPs, messaging, and unique visual identity to be consistent and focused, and to amplify your message to drive maximum value.

Earth Observation That
Peers Below the Surface

Actionable AI-driven insights from beneath the
surface of the Earth

ASTERRA

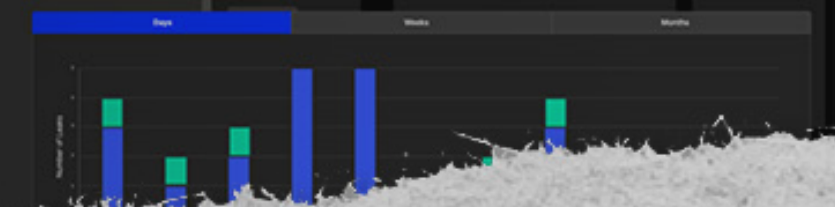
Brand Guide

We reveal leaks that
unseen for years

RESULTS

Track All Results

Track water, money, and CO2 saved. See up-to-the-minute repair progress. Track savings per project and year to year.



The Intelligence to Act

Preserving water and other resources, protecting the environment, reducing the carbon
power, and emissions are more important than ever. So is having the intelligence to

of Water Saved. And We're Just Getting Started.



AMPLIFICATION

Speak with a single voice internally and externally across all constituencies. When your branding is aligned, each new effort builds on and supports previous initiatives, reinforcing your message and making each new effort more efficient. Align all marketing channels with a consistent message so it will come through loud and clear.

CONSISTENCY

In order to grow your brand with prospects and customers, you need to establish brand recognition, which takes time and consistency. This requires being deliberate with every brand touchpoint so that customers understand who you are.

On average, it takes 5-7 consistent impressions⁸ for people to remember your brand. Make sure you're speaking with a singular, repeatable voice to make your brand more memorable. Studies have shown that there is a 33% increase in revenue⁹ for brands that are presented consistently. If you aren't generating the amount or quality of leads that you'd like, it's probably because your audience doesn't understand your brand.

When your branding is thoughtfully developed and not overly prescriptive, future creative endeavors practically write themselves, while the execution never gets stale.

PERFECT TIMING

With your intrinsic understanding of your brand, every engagement gets easier. Your organization can quickly capitalize on partner initiatives as they arise, or you can gain brand awareness by piggybacking on trending topics via newsjacking, a media strategy where a brand markets itself through a viral news story.

Newsjacking requires expert timing. You need to create something quick to capitalize on the publicity of a relevant news story. When you know your brand and what you stand for, you can easily jump on opportunities as they arise without having to rethink your brand or contort your messaging.

KRISPY KREME TAPS STRATEGIC DOUGHNUT RESERVE

During last year's surge in US gasoline prices, Krispy Kreme **lowered the price of a dozen doughnuts** on Wednesdays to match the average price of a gallon of gas for several weeks. The clever promotion earned them coverage in USA Today, Fox Business, CNN, and dozens of other media outlets.

GOOGLE'S YEAR IN REVIEW

One interesting example is Google's **Year in Search** video. This video highlights trending news stories from the past year and puts their brand at the center. They're able to strengthen their connection with their customers and reinforce their position in the tech space.



“Effective marketing isn’t just the rapid-fire creation of content, ads, and logos — they need to tell a cohesive story. Brand strategy, like strategy in any other number of fields, means creating a plan of attack for crafting your brand, and planning out the future of your branding efforts.”

- RENEGADE BRAND STRATEGY REPORT¹⁰



CASE STUDY: ASTERRA

Utilis uses patented algorithms and AI to detect leaks, assess pipes, explore minerals, and locate moisture near major installations – all from space, and without puncturing the ground. The company turned to VSSL to help develop a name and brand system for this incredible technology. We named this technology ASTERRA, drawn from a Greek river god, the Latin plural for stars, and Terra, on which we all live.

It became clear to everyone that the name Utilis, with its utility-industry association and less-than-obvious pronunciation, would not be enough to tell a story as grand as the one that emerged. And Utilis decided that the new name would not be for just their products but would be the new brand for their entire public presence.

After developing the name and positioning, we set to work crafting a bold and bracing look for every brand touchpoint. This included the website, social media posts, specific printed collateral, video content, presentation templates, environmental graphics and more. In every case, the ASTERRA branding was applied consistently across a wide variety of media, amplifying the messaging. The detailed brand development work we did up front enables their internal team to generate additional ad hoc materials very quickly.

Monitor Underground Soil Moisture Across Critical Infrastructure

Earth Observation That Peers Below the Surface

Actionable AI-driven insights from beneath the surface of the Earth

ASTERRA provides a number of industries with intelligence and insights from beneath the surface of their target installations. Without breaking ground, ASTERRA uses artificial intelligence to detect leaks, assess pipes, explore minerals, and locate moisture near major installations.

SEE OUR VIDEO »

A True Technological First

ASTERRA is the first and only technology capable of monitoring soil characteristics such as underground moisture and trace minerals over immense areas quickly, easily, continually. This is our expertise.

PoISAR Data

PoISAR, or polarimetric interferometric synthetic aperture radar, is a satellite system that can penetrate the soil and provide subsurface data on soil characteristics.

Satellite-Based

We gather data from two Earth and satellite systems, the Sentinel-1 and Sentinel-2, and AI models translate the raw data into visualizations of the location and concentration of soil phenomena.

AI-Driven Insight

A series of patented image & signal processing algorithms and AI models translate the raw data into visualizations of the location and concentration of soil phenomena.

Eyes for Industry, Government, Humanity

ASTERRA's unique technology has great implications for industry, safety, sustainability, and the environment. It is the basis of all ASTERRA applications.

Learn more about how ASTERRA can help your needs.

Recover

Industries: Dam & Levee, Road, Rail, Mining, Projects
Supports leak detection to reduce failure and provides for proactive and reactive systems for proactive remediation and efficient space use.

LEARN MORE

MasterPlan

Industries: Water and Wastewater Utilities
Maximize energy and cost effectiveness in replacement decisions and long-term plans can be made with a full system view through an online GIS platform.

EarthWorks

Industries: Dam & Levee, Road, Rail, Mining, Projects
Provides a series of soil moisture contours to illustrate the spatial critical infrastructure where failure would be catastrophic.



4

DELIVER PERSONALIZED CREATIVE AND BOLD DIGITAL MARKETING EXPERIENCES FOR YOUR AUDIENCES

Prospects crave experiences that capture their attention and connect to who they are and where they are in their buying journey. Leverage your brand to break out of the B2B mold and offer them an impactful experience that could only come from your singular brand voice. This is one of the best ways to build brand affinity and gain conversions.





At VSSL, we wanted to provide our clients with a unique gift as a thank-you for their business. We developed custom artwork for a high-end water bottle that looked amazing. Though the colors and design were “on brand”, that alone was just a small part of the overall brand experience.

The experience started when our clients received a brown craft tube with our logo stamped on the side. Inside the package were the water bottle and a card with a secret message. Using the clues inside the water bottle, our clients were encouraged to decode the secret message. This message took them to a secret page on vssl.store, where they were rewarded for solving the mystery with a complimentary antique brass bottle opener.

Only VSSL could have pulled off this specific experience because only VSSL had the deeper understanding of the brand’s ‘why’ and persona to be able to tie together the various pieces, navigation references, and puzzles. Without this brand understanding, it’s hard to create a truly memorable experience and build brand loyalty.



CASE STUDY: THINFILM COASTERS

Thinfilm, a leading provider of near-field communication (NFC) mobile marketing solutions, wanted to provide a non-traditional, immersive experience for attendees at the annual Craft Brewers Conference in Nashville, TN. The company's goal was to demonstrate to brewers how its NFC technology, SpeedTap™, could help them stand out in the crowded food and beverage industry using digital coasters.

VSSL designed a guerilla marketing campaign that placed interactive coasters throughout bars around the conference with artwork to entice patrons to take a quiz. The quizzes qualified the leads based on their status as either a brewer, a brewery owner, or a general beer fan. The most qualified leads were invited to an exclusive happy hour party where Thinfilm could get face time with these prospects.

Craft beer lovers responded positively to the innovative quiz. In fact, 84% of participants who started the quiz completed it and nearly 50% of qualified leads RSVP'd to the exclusive happy hour.

This is a great example of a B2B brand breaking out of the mold, and offering their audience a unique, personalized experience rooted in their brand.



VSSL



CAPTURE CONTINUOUS, SUSTAINED GROWTH FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

A Brand-First approach is the best — some might say only — way for the marketing department to build long-term value for the company. And done right, this approach doesn't preclude the more time-sensitive needs of the marketing team. They can continue to execute on those short-term initiatives without sacrificing the long-term gains that come from a consistent and thoughtfully considered brand framework.



By working to create a more valuable brand, companies can unlock a whole host of financial benefits:

CHARGE A 13% PREMIUM

One study shows¹¹ that meaningfully differentiated brands capture five times more volume, command a 13% price premium, and are four times more likely to grow value share during the next 12 months, compared to other brands.

LOWER ACQUISITION COSTS

According to Forbes, it can cost five times more to acquire a new customer¹² than to retain a current one. With brand-aligned messaging that addresses the specific needs of your ideal customer profiles, you can reduce wasted spend and lower your overall acquisition costs.

BUILD LONG-TERM REVENUE POTENTIAL

Brands that are able to elicit an emotional response in their customers outperform the S&P 500, according to a study by MBLM.² They are the most valuable thing that companies own, accounting for more than 30% of the stock market value¹³ of companies in the S&P index.



CASE STUDY: KALIX

Lightbend, a technology company that enables developers to easily build data-centric applications, was market-testing a new product called Akka Serverless. But this new product created confusion with the existing Akka Platform product and didn't resonate with their audience. To make matters worse, the product lacked a distinct brand, which made it difficult to sell as a standalone product. Lightbend turned to VSSL to create a completely separate brand that would avoid market confusion.

After thorough research, VSSL arrived at the name Kalix, taken from one of Sweden's major rivers. Lightbend is, after all, a Swedish company, and Akka is the name of one of its tallest mountains. With that, Kalix was now part of a naming theme that could be extended to additional products. More importantly, the name Kalix represented everything the product embodied: fluidity, adaptability, and strength, traits that would also extend to the visual branding.

The results of the rebrand have been significant. Lightbend has been able to move prospects down the funnel much more quickly, and they've seen a huge lift in advertising engagement and a massive 280% increase in demos and signups, clearly demonstrating the power of VSSL's brand-first approach.



GROWING CUSTOMERS AND BUILDING VALUE

Your brand is the most valuable thing your company owns. Though a Brand-First approach requires more discipline at the outset, over time, it makes your marketing efforts easier. It enables marketers to make faster, more effective decisions on their marketing strategies, helps your company build stronger relationships with your audience, increases loyalty and sales, and delivers continuous, sustained growth for long-term success.



READY TO DIVE INTO YOUR BRAND?

The VSSL crew can help! We've helped companies of all sizes establish and enforce a consistent, strategic brand narrative that carves differentiation and fosters brand loyalty. Reach out today if you want to learn more about our services and process.

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VSSL Agency is a full-service creative digital marketing agency located in San Diego. VSSL builds brands, invents campaigns, and creates websites for growth-oriented B2B businesses who are ready to expand their digital future. With our brand-first approach, companies can stand out in their market, attract the right customers, gain maximum value, and deliver bold digital marketing experiences that will drive sustained growth for long-term success.

