

Pretty Isn't a Strategy

*What I Learned from Studying
the World's Top Entrepreneurs
— and Why Most Brands Still Fail*

By Brandingbyel The BBE Framework

The Shift I Had to Make

I'll be honest. There was a point where I believed the answer was simply to make things look better; a stronger logo, a more elevated palette, a cleaner layout. And while those things do matter, they are not what builds brands.

Over time, through working on projects, building BrandingbyEl (BBE), and spending a lot of time watching interviews, YouTube breakdowns, and conversations with entrepreneurs I genuinely admire such as Donald Miller, Seth Godin, Leila Hormozi, Emma Grede, and Gary Vee, just to name drop a few.

They are all in different industries, have different personalities, but the same principle kept surfacing. Not once did any of them say the key to growth was making something prettier. They spoke about clarity. Positioning. Story. Execution. Attention. And slowly, something shifted in how I thought about design and about brands entirely.

The brands I kept seeing struggle weren't lacking design. In many cases, they were beautifully designed. They were unclear. And in a world where someone decides in three seconds what deserves their attention, that lack of clarity becomes the reason they scroll past.

That realization is what led to this framework, and to the way I now approach every client and personal project.

Pretty doesn't convert. Clarity does.

— The Foundation of the BBE Framework

The B.B.E Framework

Better Brand Execution

Better Brand Execution is about alignment between what you say, how you show up, and how your audience experiences your brand. Not just visually, but as a complete system.

01

Better

There is always a more effective way to communicate what you already know. Better is the discipline of refining your message until it feels obvious to a stranger, not by adding more, but cutting until what remains is exactly enough.

02

Brand

Your brand is not your logo. It is knowing exactly who you are for, what you stand for, and the feeling you want to leave people with. If you lack clarity here, your audience will feel that uncertainty.

03

Execution

Execution is the quiet discipline of showing up with that clarity again and again until your message becomes recognizable. It is not one moment that builds a brand; it is repeated understanding, told consistently across every touchpoint you own.

CHAPTER ONE

The Aesthetic *Trap*

The Aesthetic Trap

I have seen this happen more times than I can count. A brand launches with cohesive feed, elevated packaging, curated visuals. It gives the impression everything is in order. Compliments come in, but conversions don't.

I remember working through a concept where everything aligned visually. The colour story was intentional, the typography felt elevated, the mockups were portfolio-worthy. But when I stepped back and asked what the brand actually did, I noticed a pause. The answer wasn't immediate.

And that pause says everything. When understanding isn't instant, people don't stay long enough to figure it out. Pretty branding becomes a comfort zone — a place where progress feels like it's happening because something is being refined. But it avoids the harder question: does anyone actually care, and can they immediately understand why?

GARY VEE — GARY VAYNERCHUK

Chairman of VaynerX and early authority on digital marketing. Known for one belief above all: focus on what actually works, not what feels good.

"You're focusing on what makes you feel good, not what actually works."



The Three-Second Test

- | If someone landed on your page for three seconds and left, what would they believe you do, and how confident are you in that answer?
- | Are people complimenting your brand more often than they're buying from it? What might that gap be telling you?

What a stranger currently thinks I do:

What I actually want them to think:

The gap between those two answers:

One thing I can make immediately clearer:

CHAPTER TWO

Clarity Is *Currency*

Clarity Is Currency

Once you hear this idea, you can't unhear it. Brands overexplaining. Brands hiding behind language that sounds sophisticated but asks too much of the reader. Brands that require just a little too much effort to decode and so people don't bother.

I went through this refining my own messaging. It wasn't that I didn't know what I did. I was trying to say it in a way that sounded right, polished, elevated. And in attempting to make it perfect, I made it harder to understand.

Clarity doesn't come from perfection. It comes from simplicity. When clarity is present, referrals happen naturally, because people can actually repeat what you do. If they can't repeat it, they won't refer it.

DONALD MILLER — STORYBRAND

Author and creator of the StoryBrand framework, used by thousands of businesses to simplify communication. His book Building a StoryBrand is a defining resource for brand clarity.

"If you confuse, you lose."



The Fill-In Test

Complete this sentence without overthinking. The hesitation itself is information.

Could a friend repeat your offer to someone else in one sentence?

I help _____ achieve _____.

A stranger could repeat this to a friend as:

The word or phrase I keep avoiding using:

My message feels unclear because:

CHAPTER THREE

The Story *Gap*

The Story Gap

The brands that truly connect carry something underneath the visuals, the sense that this brand knows who it is for, and wants that person to feel seen.

The strongest concepts I have worked on had a point of view. A perspective the right person who encountered would think: "this is exactly for someone like me." Without that layer, a brand might look good, but it doesn't anchor itself in anything deeper.

Story is the root. Without it, the brand stays surface-level no matter how beautiful it becomes. And over time, you find yourself reworking things, not because the design was wrong, but because something underneath never connected.

SETH GODIN — AUTHOR & MARKETING THINKER

Best-selling author of Purple Cow, Tribes, and This Is Marketing. Known for his ideas on belonging and why people buy meaning, not just products.

"People don't buy products. They buy the stories they tell themselves."



Your Brand's Point of View

- What belief does your brand hold and who is that belief meant to resonate with?
- When the right customer finds you, what do they feel? What does your brand let them step into or away from?

My brand believes:

My customer feels _____ when they find my brand:

The identity my brand helps them step into:

The belief my audience already holds that I'm speaking to:

CHAPTER FOUR

The Illusion of *Progress*

04

The Illusion of Progress

Being a designer, it is very easy to stay in motion. There is always something to refine, a layout to adjust, a font to reconsider. It feels productive. It looks like building.

But there were moments I had to stop and ask: is this moving forward, or am I using design to avoid the harder strategic work underneath it? Strategy asks you to commit. Design lets you explore endlessly.

The brands that stay in this loop find themselves in the same place, things look good, but nothing compounds. Meanwhile a clearer brand, perhaps less polished, moves ahead. Not because it is better designed. Because it is easier to understand.

LEILA HORMOZI

Co-founder and Managing Partner of Acquisition.com. Known for helping businesses scale through operational excellence, leadership, and systems thinking. Advocates that sustainable growth comes from solving hard problems, not avoiding them.

"The harder the problem, the bigger the opportunity."



Progress vs. Motion

- What are you currently working on that feels productive but isn't directly improving your clarity?
- Is there a decision you have been avoiding that, if made, would simplify everything else?

The task I keep returning to that may be avoidance:

The decision I have been putting off:

What I would do instead if I chose clarity over comfort:

The strategy question I have been avoiding:

CHAPTER FIVE

Why 90% of *Brands Fail*

Why 90% of Brands Fail

Around ninety percent of startups fail, but what matters more than the number is the pattern beneath it. It is rarely just about funding or timing.

The brands I have seen struggle all shared one thing: they felt optional. Not bad, not even necessarily unclear but they did not feel necessary. They existed in the market, but they did not occupy a clear space in it.

When that clarity is missing, something quiet starts happening. It might still look good. But it struggles to hold its footing. Every season becomes a reset. Because nothing is anchored in a reason to exist strong enough to carry it forward.

EMMA GREDE — CO-FOUNDER, SKIMS & GOOD AMERICAN

Built multi-billion dollar brands rooted in precision — knowing exactly who the brand is for and what problem it genuinely solves.

"Her brands win not because they are beautiful, but because they are intentional. They own a clear space."



Your Reason to Exist

- | If your brand disappeared tomorrow, who would notice and why? What would they actually lose?
- | What makes your brand feel necessary, rather than simply nice to have?

The person who would notice my brand is gone, and why:

My brand exists because:

What would be missing from the market without it:

The specific problem only my brand solves:

CHAPTER SIX

Attention Without *Direction*

Attention Without Direction

Attention is genuinely valuable; getting someone to stop, look, and engage is harder than most people who haven't tried to build an audience understand. But attention on its own is not the destination.

Attention without clarity is wasted reach. Clarity without attention is a message in a vacuum. The brand that wins builds both in that order.

I have seen brands go viral, genuinely, impressively viral and then plateau. Because the message wasn't clear enough to guide the next step. People watched. They did not understand. And without understanding, there is nothing to do next except move on.

What often follows is a kind of creative exhaustion. You're showing up, producing consistently, doing everything right and yet you don't see any KPIs. Because there is no clear thread connecting each piece back to something someone can act on.

MARTY NEUMEIER

Brand strategist, author, and thought leader behind The Brand Gap, Zag, and Scramble. Known for simplifying complex branding concepts and teaching businesses how to stand out through differentiation and clarity.

"When everybody zigs, zag."



What Follows the Scroll-Stop?

If your content reached thousands today, would they immediately understand what you offer and know what to do next?

Is there a clear, consistent next step embedded in how you show up?

After someone discovers my brand they should feel:

The clearest next step I currently communicate:

What I want them to do within 60 seconds of finding me:

The message that has attention but no direction:

CHAPTER SEVEN

Breaking *Down* BBE

Breaking Down BBE

Better: became about refining language until it felt natural and choosing the right word over the impressive one. The discipline of Better is not in adding more. It is in cutting until what remains is exactly enough.

Brand: became about truly understanding who you are speaking to, not just demographically, but what they believe, what they fear, what they want to feel when they encounter something made for them. A brand that knows this creates recognition.

Execution: became about consistency, not perfection. Showing up with that clarity even when it felt repetitive. Because the brand designer who gets tired of their own message after ten times has an audience who is only just starting to hear it for the first time.

CHRIS DO

Founder of The Futur, educator, creative director, and business mentor for designers. Known for teaching creatives how to communicate value, build confidence, and grow profitable design businesses.

"Price is only an issue in the absence of value."



Your BBE Audit

Score yourself honestly from 1–10 in each area. Your lowest score is where your attention belongs right now.

Better — How clearly am I communicating? (1–10, and why):

Brand — How well do I know who I'm for and how I want them to feel? (1–10):

Execution — How consistently am I showing up with that clarity? (1–10):

My lowest score is in _____ because:

CHAPTER EIGHT

Execution Over *Everything*

Execution Over Everything

There is a particular fatigue that sets in when you have been showing up inconsistently. You feel like you have been working... and you have, but nothing is sticking. So you change direction, hoping this one will work.

The brands that grow are not the most creative or visually refined. They show up with the same message, across the same channels, long enough for it to become recognizable. Recognition builds trust. Trust converts.

What feels redundant to you is brand new to someone discovering you for the first time. The brand that commits to a message for six months looks entirely different from the one that pivoted three times in that window. One has built something. The other is still searching.

DEBBIE MILLMAN

Designer, author, educator, and host of the Design Matters podcast. Widely regarded as one of the most influential voices in branding and design, known for exploring the intersection of creativity, identity, and human connection.

"If you imagine less, less will be what you undoubtedly deserve."



The Commitment Prompt

What is one message you want your brand to be known for and are you repeating it enough to be remembered?

What would committing to that message for 30 days actually look like?

The one thing I want to be known for:

I will communicate it through:

I will show up _____ times per week, starting:

The thing stopping me from being consistent:

CHAPTER NINE

From Pretty to *Positioned*

From Pretty to Positioned

I have seen this shift happen through real projects, and it never stops being striking. A brand that felt broad and beautiful becomes focused. The message narrows not in a limiting way, but in a precise one. And with that precision, something unlocks.

The transformation is rarely visual. It is almost entirely strategic. Same product, same quality, but now framed around a specific person, struggle, and outcome. From 'clean skincare for everyone' to 'barrier-repair skincare for acne-prone women overwhelmed by trends.' Same dedication. Completely different resonance.

People want to feel chosen. Positioning is not about excluding people, it is about being so clear for the right person that they feel seen in a way a broad, general brand never could. That feeling of being seen is what creates loyalty.

MICHAEL JOHNSON

Founder of Johnson Banks and one of the world's most respected brand identity designers. Known for creating strategic visual identities that solve business problems and proving that branding is far more than just a logo.

"A logo is not a brand unless and until it earns that recognition."



Rewrite Your Brand

Rewrite your positioning in one specific sentence. No generalities, no 'for everyone.' Make it narrow enough that someone immediately knows if it's for them.

Current positioning (what you say now, honestly):

We help _____ who struggle with _____ achieve _____.

Where I can be more specific without overcomplicating:

The type of person I'm most afraid to exclude — and why I should stop:

CHAPTER TEN

What Actually *Builds Brands*

10

What Actually Builds Brands

After everything; the interviews, the projects, the experience, the conclusion is not dramatic. But it is consistent. Brands are built by clarity, reinforced through consistency, and strengthened through execution. Everything else supports that foundation. Nothing replaces it.

When all three are genuinely in place, the brand becomes something for someone. Each piece of content adds to the last. Each touchpoint reinforces the message. The clarity does the heavy lifting.

The lesson is simple to say and genuinely difficult to apply, not because the ideas are complex, but because they require honesty. About what you are avoiding, what is unclear, what you have been telling yourself is clear when it really is not yet. That honesty is where the real work begins.

THE BBE THROUGH-LINE

Across every entrepreneur studied, every brand observed, every project worked on — one truth keeps surfacing. Not as a trend. As a constant.

"Clarity over Everything. Execution always."



One Thing. Today.

What is one thing you can simplify, clarify, or commit to starting today? Not next week. Today.

The one thing I will simplify:

The one thing I will make clearer:

The one thing I will commit to repeating:

My first action within the next 24 hours:

The Lesson

This is what I keep coming back to...

Pretty is not what builds brands. It can open the door and create a first impression that earns a second look. However, a well-designed brand has real power, it signals care, intentionality, and craft. I am not dismissing that. But aesthetics alone do not create connection. They do not build understanding. They do not earn trust or drive decisions or turn a casual observer into someone who genuinely wants what you offer.

That work belongs to clarity, and to the consistency and execution that carry it forward over time. The brands that last got clear first and beautiful second. Not because beauty doesn't matter, but because clarity is what gives beauty somewhere to go. It is the difference between a brand that attracts and one that retains. Between one that gets noticed and one that gets chosen.

If any names mentioned throughout this e-book are new to you, look them up. Each has built their perspective through real experience, and there is something valuable in hearing how each of them approaches clarity from a different angle.

At Brandingbyel, the goal has never been
to create something that simply looks good.

It is to create something that makes sense right away —
that connects intentionally and continues to perform.

Pretty gets attention.

Clarity gets conversions.

Execution builds brands.

Pretty isn't a strategy.
Better Brand Execution is.

— BrandingbyEl

The BBE 3-Step Brand Clarity Plan

Reading this gave you awareness. Awareness without action changes nothing. Here is how to apply the BBE framework — one deliberate step at a time.

01

Better — Clarify Your Message

Say less, mean more, trust that simplicity carries weight. Your goal: someone encounters your brand in a caption or headline and immediately understands what you do and whether it is for them.

"I help _____ achieve _____ without _____." Refine until it feels so obvious it almost feels too simple.

02

Brand — Define Who It's For

Brand is the experience and emotional truth underneath your visuals. Know who you are speaking to — not just demographics, but what they care about and what they hope to feel when they encounter something made for them.

My brand is for: _____ · They struggle with: _____ · I want them to feel: _____

03

Execution — Show Up Consistently

This is where brands win or lose. Show up with the same message long enough for it to become recognizable. The tenth time you say something is often the first time someone truly hears it.

My core message: _____ · Communicated through: _____ · _____ times per week.

CHOOSE YOUR NEXT STEP

You Don't Need a Better Logo.

You need a clearer message, a stronger position, better execution.

FOR FOUNDERS JUST STARTING

Brand Clarity Starter Kit

A self-guided workbook built on the BBE framework. Brand voice guide, messaging templates, positioning prompts, content direction. Walk away with a clear message, defined audience, and confident direction.

[Download the Starter Kit](#)

FOR BRANDS THAT FEEL STUCK

The BBE Brand Audit

A full strategic breakdown of what is not working and exactly how to fix it. Clarity score across all three BBE pillars, positioning review, prioritized action plan as a Loom walkthrough and PDF.

[Book Your BBE Audit](#)

FOR BRANDS READY TO SCALE

1:1 Brand Strategy Intensive

Full-scope strategic engagement. We define your message, position your brand clearly, build a strategic identity system, and align content and visuals around a clear narrative. Not just design but infrastructure.

[Apply to Work Together](#)

Your brand isn't the problem. *Your clarity is.*

And clarity is exactly what we build.

[Start With the Kit](#)

[Book an Audit](#)

[Apply to Work Together](#)