

A STRATEGY WORKBOOK FOR FOUNDERS

# The Why Before Wow<sup>TM</sup>

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Five gates that turn a vague idea into a brand people understand, remember and choose, before you spend a dollar on how it looks.

FINISH IN ONE SITTING

**90 minutes → one brief**

INTERACTIVE PDF  
TYPE DIRECTLY INTO EVERY FIELD

# Most brands don't fail because they don't look good. They fail because nobody can explain them.

You can have a beautiful logo, a considered palette and a website that photographs well, and still lose the sale, because the person looking at it can't answer three questions fast enough: what is this, who is it for, and why should I pick it over the other one?

1

## You rebrand and nothing changes

New look, same silence.  
Because the problem was never visual.

2

## You compete on price

When difference isn't clear, cost becomes the only comparison left.

3

## Your content works too hard

You explain the same thing forty ways because one clear way was never written.

### ✦ The premise of this workbook

Design is an **amplifier**, not a translator. It makes whatever you already mean louder. If the meaning is fuzzy, beautiful design makes the fuzziness louder too. So we settle meaning first. That's the whole idea behind Why Before Wow.

This workbook is not a branding course, a logo template, or a personality quiz. It's a working document. By page 32 you'll hold a one-page Brand Clarity Brief you can hand to any designer, copywriter or contractor, and they'll know exactly what to build.

# How to work through it

1

## Do it in one sitting

Ninety minutes, phone away. Clarity comes from momentum. Spreading this over three weeks produces three different brands.

2

## Write badly on purpose

First pass is for honesty, not polish. You are excavating what's true, not drafting a tagline. Wordsmithing happens at Gate 04.

3

## Score each gate before moving on

Every gate ends with a check. Score it honestly. A low score isn't failure, it's a map of where your brand is leaking.

4

## Don't skip to Wow

Gate 05 is the fun one. It's also the one that wastes the most money when it's reached early. It stays locked until the first four are answered.

### YOU'LL NEED

- 90 uninterrupted minutes
- Your last 5 client or customer conversations, from memory
- Two competitors you respect
- Total honesty about what you actually sell

### TWO WAYS TO FILL IT IN

Open in Acrobat, Preview or any PDF reader and type directly into every field, so your answers save with the file. Or print it and write by hand.

### Working with a team?

Everyone fills Gates 01 to 03 separately, then compare. The gaps between your answers are the most valuable thing in the room.

#### BEFORE YOU START

Date you're completing this, and the name of the brand you're working on.

#### BRAND

#### DATE

THE FIVE GATES

# Four questions earn you the right to the fifth.

Each gate is a door. You don't get through it with a good feeling. You get through it with a sentence you'd be willing to put on the homepage.

|    |              |                       |                                                                 |
|----|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 01 | <b>WHY</b>   | PURPOSE & POSITION    | Why does this exist, beyond making money?                       |
| 02 | <b>WHO</b>   | AUDIENCE & ASPIRATION | Who is it for, and what do they want to become?                 |
| 03 | <b>WHAT</b>  | OFFER & DIFFERENCE    | What do you sell, and why choose you over the next one?         |
| 04 | <b>WORDS</b> | MESSAGE & VOICE       | How do you say all of it in one line, the same way, every time? |
| 05 | <b>WOW</b>   | EXPRESSION & DESIGN   | Only now: what should it look and feel like?                    |

## Why the order matters

Every gate is raw material for the next. Your **Why** filters who you're for. Your **Who** decides which **What** to lead with. What and who together write your **Words**. Only then does **Wow** have something to amplify.

## What comes out the other end

A Brand Clarity Score out of 50 that shows exactly where you're leaking, and a one-page Brand Clarity Brief that any designer can build from without a single follow-up call.

# WHY

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## PURPOSE & POSITION

Not a mission statement for the wall. The actual reason this exists, the thing that would still be true if you changed everything you sell tomorrow.

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## THE GATE QUESTION

**What would be missing from your customers' lives if you closed on Friday?**

## 1.1 The problem you actually solve

Describe the problem in your customer's words, not your industry's. If your answer contains the words *solutions*, *seamless*, or *passionate*, write it again.

THE PROBLEM, SAID PLAINLY

## 1.2 The founding truth

Why *you*? What did you see, live through, or get frustrated by that made this business the obvious thing for you to build?

THE HONEST ORIGIN

## 1.3 What you refuse to do

Purpose is defined by its edges. Name two things your competitors happily do that you won't, and why not.

WE WILL NEVER

WE WILL NEVER

## 1.4 The belief statement

Every brand worth choosing believes something its category doesn't. Fill this in until it makes you slightly nervous. That's the sign it's specific enough to be worth saying.

**Most [my category] believe...**

**We believe...**

**Which is why we...**

### ✦ Worked example

"Most studios believe a rebrand starts with a logo. We believe a rebrand starts with a sentence. Which is why we won't open a design file until a client can say what they do in one line." Note that it takes a real position, and someone somewhere would disagree with it. That's the test.

NOW COMPRESS 1.1 TO 1.4 INTO ONE SENTENCE. THIS IS YOUR WHY.

GATE 01 CHECK

# Score yourself honestly.

Rate each statement 0 to 2. 0 = not true yet · 1 = partly, or only in my head · 2 = written down and I'd defend it.

I can state the problem we solve in one sentence, without jargon.

I know why this business is mine to build and not anyone's.

I can name at least two things we deliberately refuse to do.

I hold a belief my category broadly doesn't share.

Someone reasonable could disagree with our position. It's not universally agreeable.

## Gate 01 subtotal

Out of 10. Under 6 means come back before moving on.

IF ANYTHING SCORED 0 OR 1, WHAT'S THE ONE THING YOU NEED TO DECIDE?

# WHO

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## AUDIENCE & ASPIRATION

Not a demographic. A person with a problem, a budget, a deadline and an opinion about people like you, formed before they ever landed on your site.

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## THE GATE QUESTION

**Who is already looking for this, and what do they believe before you speak?**

## 2.1 The one real buyer

Skip the persona template. Think of an actual person who has paid you, or who you wish had. Write about them, not a category.

WHO THEY ARE, IN ONE BREATH

THE MOMENT THEY GO LOOKING

## 2.2 Before & after

Brands are bought for the gap between these two columns. Be concrete: feelings *and* circumstances.

BEFORE YOU

AFTER YOU

## 2.3 What they already believe

The objection they don't say out loud. Naming it in your copy is worth more than any testimonial.

THE SILENT OBJECTION

## 2.4 The words they actually use

Pull five phrases from real emails, DMs, reviews or sales calls, theirs and not yours. This is the single highest-leverage list in the whole workbook: it becomes your headlines later.

1

2

3

4

5

## 2.5 Who this is *not* for

A brand that speaks to everyone is heard by no one. Name who you're happy to lose.

NOT FOR

NOT FOR

COMPRESS IT: WHO IS THIS FOR, AND WHAT DO THEY WANT TO BECOME?

GATE 02 CHECK

# Score yourself honestly.

Rate each statement 0 to 2. 0 = not true yet · 1 = partly, or only in my head · 2 = written down and I'd defend it.

I'm describing a specific person, not an age bracket.

I know the exact moment that sends them looking for this.

I can name the transformation they're buying, not just the service.

I've written down five phrases in their words, not mine.

I've named who this is *not* for and I'm at peace with it.

## Gate 02 subtotal

Out of 10. Under 6 means come back before moving on.

IF ANYTHING SCORED 0 OR 1, WHAT'S THE ONE THING YOU NEED TO DECIDE?

# WHAT

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## OFFER & DIFFERENCE

The gap between what you think you sell and what people actually pay for is where most revenue quietly leaks. This gate closes it.

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## THE GATE QUESTION

**What are you selling, and why would someone choose it over the next one?**

## 3.1 What you actually sell

List your offers, then next to each write what the customer believes they're buying. If the two columns don't match, your marketing is doing the wrong job.

| THE OFFER            | WHAT THEY THINK THEY'RE BUYING |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/>           |
| <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/>           |
| <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/>           |
| <input type="text"/> | <input type="text"/>           |

## 3.2 The competitor contrast

Two competitors you genuinely respect. What do they own in the customer's mind, and what does that leave open for you?

| COMPETITOR                                          | COMPETITOR                                          | LEFT OPEN FOR YOU               |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <div>THEY OWN</div> <div><input type="text"/></div> | <div>THEY OWN</div> <div><input type="text"/></div> | <div><input type="text"/></div> |

### 3.3 The Only Statement

The hardest and most valuable sentence in this workbook. Finish it so that it would be *false* if a competitor said it. If any of them could copy-paste it, it isn't done.

#### We are the only

KIND OF BUSINESS

THAT DOES THIS

FOR THESE PEOPLE

BECAUSE OF THIS, WHICH THEY CAN'T COPY

#### Three legitimate sources of “only”

**Method:** a process you named and can prove.

**Focus:** a niche you serve to a depth others won't.

**Combination:** two capabilities rarely held by one person.

#### Three that aren't

**Quality:** everyone claims it, nobody can check it.

**Passion:** describes you, not their outcome.

**Service:** the price of entry, not a difference.

COMPRESS IT: WHAT YOU SELL, AND THE REASON TO CHOOSE IT.

GATE 03 CHECK

# Score yourself honestly.

Rate each statement 0 to 2. 0 = not true yet · 1 = partly, or only in my head · 2 = written down and I'd defend it.

What I sell and what they think they're buying now match.

I know what my two strongest competitors own in the customer's mind.

I've written an Only Statement a competitor couldn't truthfully copy.

My difference is a method, focus or combination, not "quality".

I could defend my price without discounting.

## Gate 03 subtotal

Out of 10. Under 6 means come back before moving on.

IF ANYTHING SCORED 0 OR 1, WHAT'S THE ONE THING YOU NEED TO DECIDE?

# WORDS

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## MESSAGE & VOICE

Gates 01 to 03 gave you the raw material. This gate turns it into language you can repeat identically on a website, a pitch, a Reel and a cold email, without rewriting it each time.

## THE GATE QUESTION

**Can a stranger repeat what you do, accurately, after one sentence?**

## 4.1 The one-liner builder

Pull directly from your earlier answers. Build it in parts first, then write it as one natural sentence underneath.

I / WE HELP

TO

BY

UNLIKE

NOW SAY IT LIKE A HUMAN WOULD SAY IT OUT LOUD

Test it: read it to someone outside your industry. If they ask a follow-up question to understand *what you do*, it isn't finished. If they ask a follow-up because they're interested, it is.

## 4.2 Three proof points

The one-liner makes a claim. These make it credible. Numbers, named outcomes, specifics. Never adjectives.

PROOF 01

PROOF 02

PROOF 03

## 4.3 Voice dials

Mark where you sit on each: 1 at the far left, 5 at the far right. Voice is a set of positions, not a list of adjectives, and positions are something a writer can actually follow.

1 TO 5

|              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |             |                                                                                                     |
|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Warm         | <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid #ccc; position: relative; height: 10px; margin: 0 auto;"> <div style="position: absolute; left: 0; top: -1px; width: 1px; height: 10px;"></div> <div style="position: absolute; right: 0; top: -1px; width: 1px; height: 10px;"></div> </div> | Cool        | <input style="width: 50px; height: 25px; border: 1px solid #ccc; border-radius: 5px;" type="text"/> |
| Plain-spoken | <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid #ccc; position: relative; height: 10px; margin: 0 auto;"> <div style="position: absolute; left: 0; top: -1px; width: 1px; height: 10px;"></div> <div style="position: absolute; right: 0; top: -1px; width: 1px; height: 10px;"></div> </div> | Elevated    | <input style="width: 50px; height: 25px; border: 1px solid #ccc; border-radius: 5px;" type="text"/> |
| Playful      | <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid #ccc; position: relative; height: 10px; margin: 0 auto;"> <div style="position: absolute; left: 0; top: -1px; width: 1px; height: 10px;"></div> <div style="position: absolute; right: 0; top: -1px; width: 1px; height: 10px;"></div> </div> | Serious     | <input style="width: 50px; height: 25px; border: 1px solid #ccc; border-radius: 5px;" type="text"/> |
| Bold         | <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid #ccc; position: relative; height: 10px; margin: 0 auto;"> <div style="position: absolute; left: 0; top: -1px; width: 1px; height: 10px;"></div> <div style="position: absolute; right: 0; top: -1px; width: 1px; height: 10px;"></div> </div> | Understated | <input style="width: 50px; height: 25px; border: 1px solid #ccc; border-radius: 5px;" type="text"/> |
| Expert       | <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid #ccc; position: relative; height: 10px; margin: 0 auto;"> <div style="position: absolute; left: 0; top: -1px; width: 1px; height: 10px;"></div> <div style="position: absolute; right: 0; top: -1px; width: 1px; height: 10px;"></div> </div> | Peer        | <input style="width: 50px; height: 25px; border: 1px solid #ccc; border-radius: 5px;" type="text"/> |

## 4.4 Say this, not that

The fastest voice guide ever invented. Three swaps is enough to keep a whole team consistent.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p style="margin: 0; font-size: 0.8em;">WE SAY</p> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; background-color: #fff9c4; height: 25px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; background-color: #fff9c4; height: 25px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; background-color: #fff9c4; height: 25px;"></div> | <p style="margin: 0; font-size: 0.8em;">NEVER</p> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; background-color: #f0f0f0; height: 25px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; background-color: #f0f0f0; height: 25px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; background-color: #f0f0f0; height: 25px;"></div> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## 4.5 The elevator version

Same message, three lengths. If they don't all say the same thing, the short one wins and the long ones get rewritten, not the other way round.

|                                                         |                                                          |                                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p style="margin: 0; font-size: 0.8em;">THREE WORDS</p> | <p style="margin: 0; font-size: 0.8em;">ONE SENTENCE</p> | <p style="margin: 0; font-size: 0.8em;">THIRTY SECONDS</p> |
|                                                         |                                                          |                                                            |

GATE 04 CHECK

# Score yourself honestly.

Rate each statement 0 to 2. 0 = not true yet · 1 = partly, or only in my head · 2 = written down and I'd defend it.

I have one sentence I use everywhere, word for word.

A stranger outside my industry understood it on the first read.

I have three proof points that are specific, not adjectives.

My voice is marked as positions on a scale, not a list of moods.

I've written down words we use and words we never use.

## Gate 04 subtotal

Out of 10. Under 6 means come back before moving on.

IF ANYTHING SCORED 0 OR 1, WHAT'S THE ONE THING YOU NEED TO DECIDE?

# WOW

## EXPRESSION & DESIGN

Now, and only now, we talk about how it looks. Everything you've written becomes the brief. Design stops being decoration and starts being a decision with a reason behind it.

## THE GATE QUESTION

**What must this look and feel like, for everything above to be believed?**

## 5.1 The permission check

Before you brief a designer, spend a dollar or open a single file, four yes-or-no questions. Write Y or N.

I can say what we do in one sentence, from memory.

I know precisely who it's for, and who it isn't.

I have a reason to be chosen that a competitor couldn't claim.

I have three proof points that aren't adjectives.

Any N? Go back. Designing now means paying to make an unclear message look expensive, and then paying again in eighteen months.

## 5.2 Three feeling words

Not what you like. What your buyer needs to *feel* in the first three seconds for your Only Statement to be believable. "Modern" and "clean" are banned; they mean nothing to a designer.

01

02

03

## 5.3 Reference & anti-reference

Two brands whose *feeling* is right (any industry) and one whose feeling is wrong. Say why in each case. The reason is the useful part, not the name.

RIGHT, BECAUSE

RIGHT, BECAUSE

WRONG, BECAUSE

## 5.4 Where it has to work

Identity is decided by its hardest application, not its prettiest one. Name the five places this brand will genuinely live, and star the one it must survive.

1

2

3

4

5

## 5.5 The non-negotiables

Real constraints save real money. Existing assets to keep, colours you can't use, accessibility needs, print limits, platform requirements.

MUST KEEP / MUST AVOID

### ✦ One last discipline

When you review the design work that comes back, don't ask "do I like it?" Ask "does this make my Only Statement more believable to the person in Gate 02?" That single swap is the difference between a brand and a preference.

GATE 05 CHECK

# Score yourself honestly.

Rate each statement 0 to 2. 0 = not true yet · 1 = partly, or only in my head · 2 = written down and I'd defend it.

I answered Y to all four permission questions.

My three feeling words are specific, not "modern" or "clean".

I can explain *why* my references feel right, not just that they do.

I know the hardest place this brand has to work.

I've listed the real constraints before asking anyone to design.

## Gate 05 subtotal

Out of 10. Under 6 means come back before moving on.

IF ANYTHING SCORED 0 OR 1, WHAT'S THE ONE THING YOU NEED TO DECIDE?

BRAND CLARITY SCORE

# Add up your five gates.

|                                  |              |                                          |                      |     |
|----------------------------------|--------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------|-----|
| 01                               | <b>WHY</b>   | Purpose is specific and takes a position | <input type="text"/> | /10 |
| 02                               | <b>WHO</b>   | Audience is a person, not a bracket      | <input type="text"/> | /10 |
| 03                               | <b>WHAT</b>  | Difference is provable, not claimed      | <input type="text"/> | /10 |
| 04                               | <b>WORDS</b> | One sentence, used everywhere            | <input type="text"/> | /10 |
| 05                               | <b>WOW</b>   | Design has a brief, not a mood           | <input type="text"/> | /10 |
| <b>Total Brand Clarity Score</b> |              |                                          | <input type="text"/> | /50 |

0 TO 20 · FOGGED

Your brand is running on instinct. That's normal and fixable, but do not commission design yet. Rework Gates 01 and 02 until they're sentences you'd defend.

21 TO 32 · HALF-LIT

You know who you are; it's just not said the same way twice. Gate 04 is your highest-leverage hour. Fix the words before touching the visuals.

33 TO 43 · CLEAR

Strong foundation with one soft gate. Find your lowest score, fix that alone, then brief the design work with real confidence.

44 TO 50 · SHARP

You've earned the Wow. Your brief on the next page is genuinely buildable. Hand it over and hold the work to it.

LOWEST-SCORING GATE, AND THE ONE ACTION THAT WOULD RAISE IT

OUTPUT

# Your Brand Clarity Brief

One page. Copy it into an email and any designer, writer or agency can start work without a discovery call.

BRAND

CLARITY SCORE /50



WHY WE EXIST

WHO IT'S FOR

WHO IT'S NOT FOR



THE ONLY STATEMENT: WHY CHOOSE US

THE ONE-LINER: USED EVERYWHERE, WORD FOR WORD

PROOF

VOICE, IN FIVE POSITIONS



MUST FEEL

MUST WORK HARDEST HERE

NON-NEGOTIABLES

# You've done the part most people skip.

The brief on the previous page is worth more than any moodboard. Protect it: put it at the top of every creative brief, every job posting, every content plan. When something feels off-brand, this is the document you check it against.

## THIS WEEK

Replace the first line of your website, your bio and your pitch with your one-liner. Word for word, all three. Change nothing else and watch what happens.

## THIS MONTH

Audit your last twenty posts against your Only Statement. Anything that doesn't support it is content you paid for that worked for someone else.

## THIS QUARTER

Now brief the visual work, yourself or someone else. You have a document that makes it a decision instead of a guess.

WANT A SECOND PAIR OF EYES ON YOUR BRIEF?

## Send it to me. I read every one.

Reply to the email this workbook came with, or book a Brand Clarity Conversation at [brandingbyel.ca](https://brandingbyel.ca). Bring your score and your lowest gate.

◆ **BRANDINGBYEL**

CLARITY THROUGH CREATIVE IDENTITY