



Brand systems explained

What a brand system is, why it matters to a firm, and how to make the case for one internally.

Written for

Brand, marketing and operations teams

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Document

Guide

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02	What a brand system is	How it works, the warning signs and the design work behind it
03	Making the case internally	Each person's argument, the portfolio view and what standing still costs
04	Getting started	The steps, the diagnostic and where to go from here



01

Why it matters

The commercial case, the evidence behind it, and why now is the time.

Why it matters

Most people reading a firm's material are not making a decision today. That material builds the memory that decides the shortlist when they are.

A brand system keeps that memory consistent: the same look and voice every time, whoever made the material and whatever tool they used.

1 in 20

Business buyers in the market for a new provider in any quarter. Ehrenberg-Bass

32

Percentage points faster revenue growth for top quartile design performers. McKinsey, 2018

56

Percentage points faster total returns to shareholders, from the same study. McKinsey, 2018

The evidence

Four sources that survive a challenge

All four are independent of anyone selling brand software. Full references on request.

01

McKinsey Design Index, 2018

300 listed companies over five years. The market paid only the firms that stood out. Middling design bought nothing.

02

Ehrenberg-Bass

Firms change their principal bank or law firm roughly once every five years. Most of the people reading a firm's material are not buying yet.

03

Thomson Reuters Sharplegal

Brand strength in legal is measured as consideration: whether a firm reaches the shortlist before anyone reads the pitch.

04

Processing fluency

Material that is easier to process is judged more favourably and more truthful. Consistency is what makes a firm easy to process.

Why now

AI tools now let anyone in your organisation produce client and investor material. The review layer has not grown with them.

More hands, same checks

Fee earners, deal teams, BD and bids teams can now produce documents, decks and posts in minutes. Each tool follows what its files tell it, at volume, and nothing in it notices when something looks wrong. Each miss is found and fixed by hand, after the fact.

Decisions cost least early

The rules set when a DAM, a template set or an AI tool goes in shape everything made after it. They cost least when decided at the start. Changing them later means touching every file.

What a brand system is

How a brand system works, the signs one is missing, and the design decisions and testing behind it.

What a brand system is

A brand system is the connected set of assets, rules and decision logic that lets a brand come out the same way every time.

Visual identity, verbal identity, brand architecture, governance, templates and components all sit inside it, held in one place and kept current.

A guidelines document is part of a system. An asset library is part of a system. Most firms have bought the parts. Very few have built the thing that holds them together.

What a brand system is

Each layer of the system feeds the next

01 Set the standard

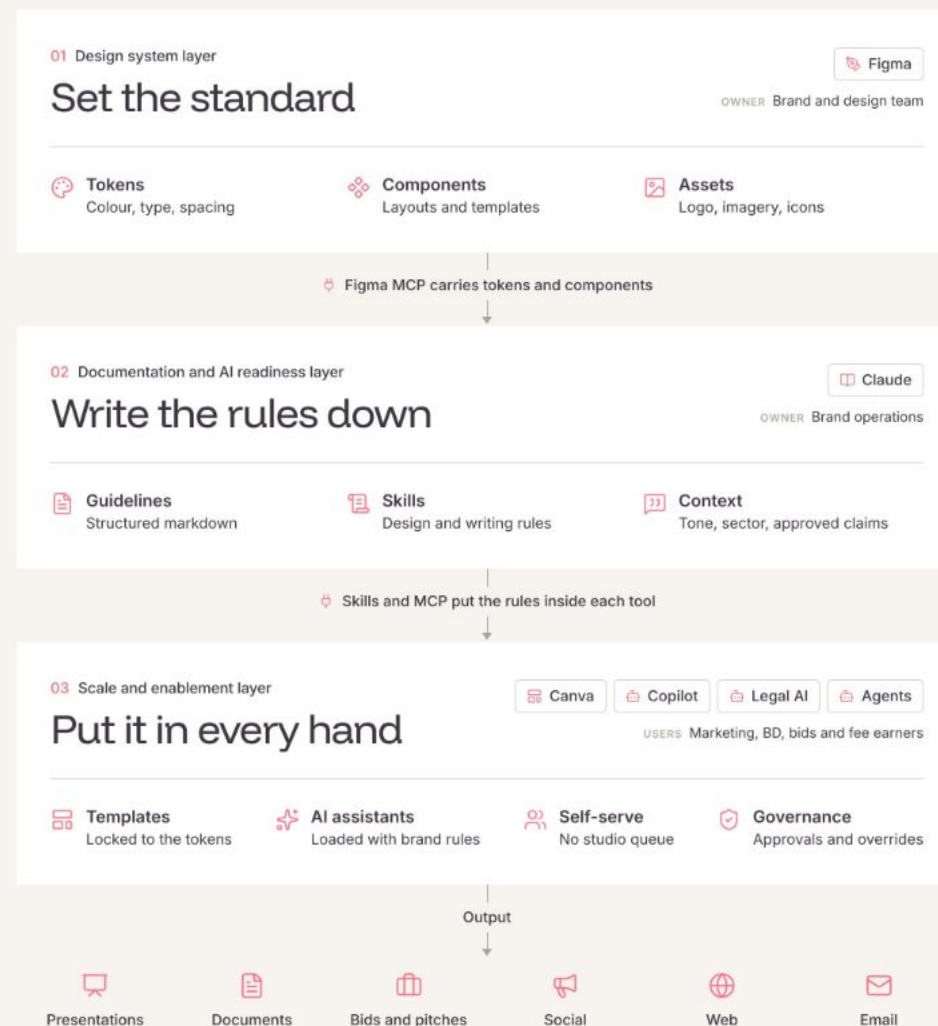
Tokens, components and assets in Figma. Owned by the brand and design team.

02 Write the rules down

Guidelines and rules structured so AI tools can follow them. Owned by brand operations.

03 Put it in every hand

Templates and AI assistants loaded with the rules, so marketing, BD, deal teams and fee earners get it right first time.



What a brand system is

Signs the system underneath is missing

This held while a few dozen people produced client documents and somebody was always checking. It stops holding when every fee earner and deal team has a tool that produces client material at volume. Then each sign is paid for in rework hours, and in days lost getting anything new out.

- 01 The guidelines are a PDF nobody opens
- 02 Templates get copied from old documents rather than pulled from the current set
- 03 The person who knows which logo file is current is one resignation from taking that with them
- 04 Nobody can say which version of the disclaimer is on the deck that left the building this morning
- 05 Each portfolio company runs its own version, and nobody at group level can see which

Every rule in a system is a design decision

The guidelines cover the obvious cases. A system has to answer everything else, and each answer needs a designer who can see what the brand needs and stand behind the ruling when a senior person pushes back.

01

Which colour is retired, and which is a rule?

Old files are full of both. Left to a tool, a retired colour becomes a rule and repeats at volume.

02

Which layout is a one-off, and which is a pattern?

One pitch's layout should not become a template. A layout the firm uses every week should.

03

What happens where the guidelines say nothing?

A chart with seven series. A client's logo beside the firm's. A table that runs to four pages. Each needs a ruling before anyone meets it under deadline.

04

How far can each office or company flex?

Too tight and people work around the system. Too loose and it stops being one. The line is a judgement, made once and written down.

Finessed and tested until it holds

A system is finished when a non-designer gets on-brand output without asking anyone. Reaching that point takes rounds of testing and adjustment that need a designer's eye.

01

Build from real documents

Templates start from the documents the firm sends most, with real content in them. A tidy sample page proves nothing.

02

Fill it the way people will

Long names, dense tables, co-branded covers and long bids. Filled by fee earners, deal teams and AI tools.

03

Break it on purpose

Every template is pushed until it fails, so the limits turn up in testing and stay out of a client's inbox.

04

Refine and test again

Spacing, hierarchy and type adjusted in small steps, then tested again with the people who will use it.

What gets checked before handover

Models redraw logos, invent colours, fall back on safe layouts and recreate graphic devices badly. Every output is tested against that list and corrected before the system is handed over.

03

Making the case internally

One argument for each person in the room, the private equity portfolio view, the questions to expect, and what standing still costs.

One argument for each person in the room

01

The CMO

A board answer. Top quartile design performers grew revenue 32 percentage points faster (McKinsey, 2018). Consistency keeps the firm in a buyer's memory between appointments.

02

The COO or operating partner

Control over what leaves the building and across the portfolio, without adding people to check it. A named owner and an audit trail.

03

The brand team

The brand stays as it is. The system gives the people who built it control over what everyone else produces, and far less time spent correcting.

04

Marketing operations

Templates and rules that work properly, so requests stop coming back. More output without more headcount.

05

Digital

One authoritative source for colour, type, layout and assets, held so the DAM, the website and AI tools can read it. A change is made once and reaches every file.

06

Bids, pitches and fundraising

Faster assembly under deadline, and material that reads as one firm before anyone gets to the content.

One system across the firm and its portfolio

Operations teams own the problem twice: once for the firm's own material, and again across every company it holds.

01

The firm

Fundraising decks, investor reports and investment committee papers come out the same way, whoever on the deal or investor relations team made them.

02

The portfolio

One master system that each company inherits, with a defined set of things each one can change. Built and paid for once, at group level, and the group can see what is in use, company by company.

03

Acquisition and exit

A new company joins the system in its first hundred days instead of rebuilding from nothing. At exit, the brand and its rules hand over as a documented asset.

Questions the case will meet

01

Does consistency make the brand dull?

McKinsey measured design as a business practice. Top quartile firms stood out because they carried a distinctive idea across everything they made. An idea with no system shows up once in fifty pieces.

02

We already have guidelines

Guidelines describe the brand. They have no say over what a template, a fee earner, a portfolio company or an AI tool produces. A system holds the guidelines, assets and rules together and keeps them current.

03

Can we generate a system with AI?

It is worth trying. A model copies whatever is in the source files, mistakes included, and repeats them at volume. The design work is deciding what is right, testing that it holds, getting people to use it and keeping it right.

What standing still costs

A worked example on indicative UK figures. Replace each one with the firm's own.

01	Correction Brand and design time spent fixing other people's work. One day a week	Hours a week		Hourly cost		Working weeks		Cost a year
		8	×	£22	×	46		£8,096
02	Senior time Fee earners formatting their own documents. Twenty people, an hour a month each	Hours a month		Hourly rate		Months		Cost a year
		20	×	200	×	12		£48,000
03	Remediation Every file brought back into line after a change. Half an hour a file	Files to update		Hours per file		Hourly cost		Cost per change
		500	×	0.5	×	£22		£5,500
04	Time to market Sign-off to in use everywhere. One designer, then a month to switch	Days to update		Days to adopt				Working days
		33	+	20				53

On these inputs: about £62,000 a year with one brand or rule change, and more than ten working weeks before each change is in use everywhere. A brand system is built to bring each of these down.

Hourly cost: ONS ASHE 2025 median pay for graphic and multimedia designers, £32,510, plus employer National Insurance and minimum pension, over 1,725 working hours. Hourly rate: HMCTS solicitors' guideline hourly rate, grade C, National 1, January 2026. Hours, file counts and times are illustrative assumptions.



04

Getting started

Where to start, what can follow, and a tool for checking files before they go out.

Getting started

Each step is a small decision

Each step produces the evidence for the next.
The Pulse is free, and the diagnostic is priced to be signed off on the spot.

01

Four minutes, free

Brand System Pulse

Twelve questions online, with an instant reading of where the firm stands.

02

Sixty minutes

Brand system diagnostic

Seven areas scored live, with a report the firm can act on.

03

Ten working days

Audit

The same seven areas, evidenced inside the firm's systems, with a costed roadmap.

04

Scoped from the audit

Build

System, templates and tooling, handed over to the firm's team to run.

05

Monthly

Retained

Adoption monitored, the system improved on a cycle, training kept current.

Diagnostic £950 plus VAT, credited in full against the audit if commissioned within 90 days.

The brand system diagnostic

Sixty minutes, live, with the brand or operations lead in the room. The report follows within 24 hours.

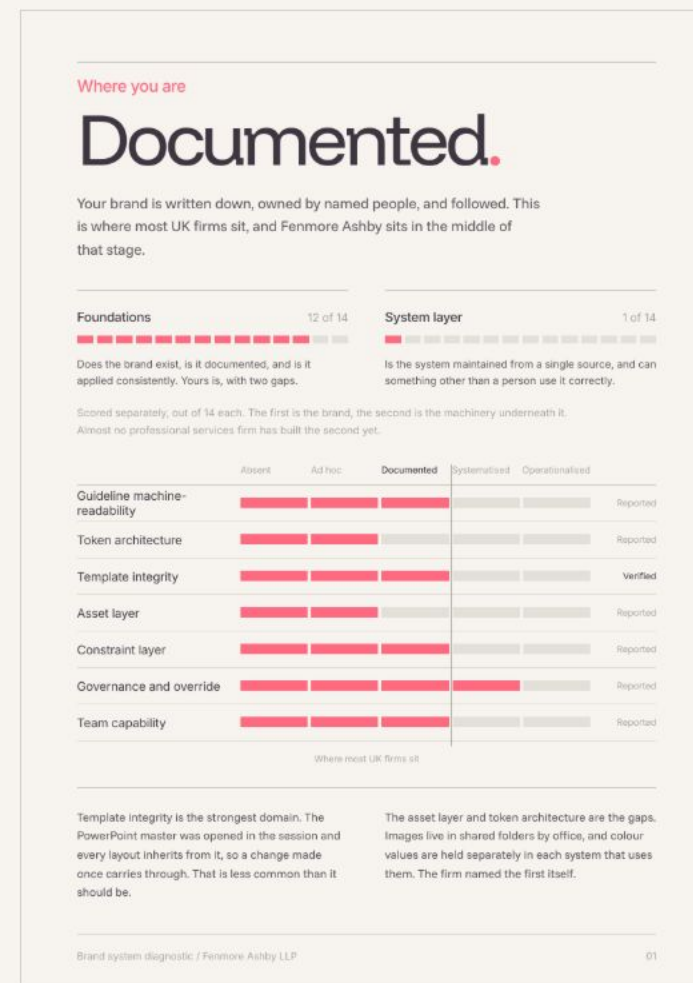
01 A stage for the firm and for each of seven areas, from guidelines to the asset layer

02 The three things most likely to cause a problem

03 What to fix first, and what it costs

04 A report written to circulate inside the firm

£950 plus VAT, credited in full against the audit if commissioned within 90 days.



Sample report page, for a fictional firm.

A brand check before any file goes out

01 Write the rules

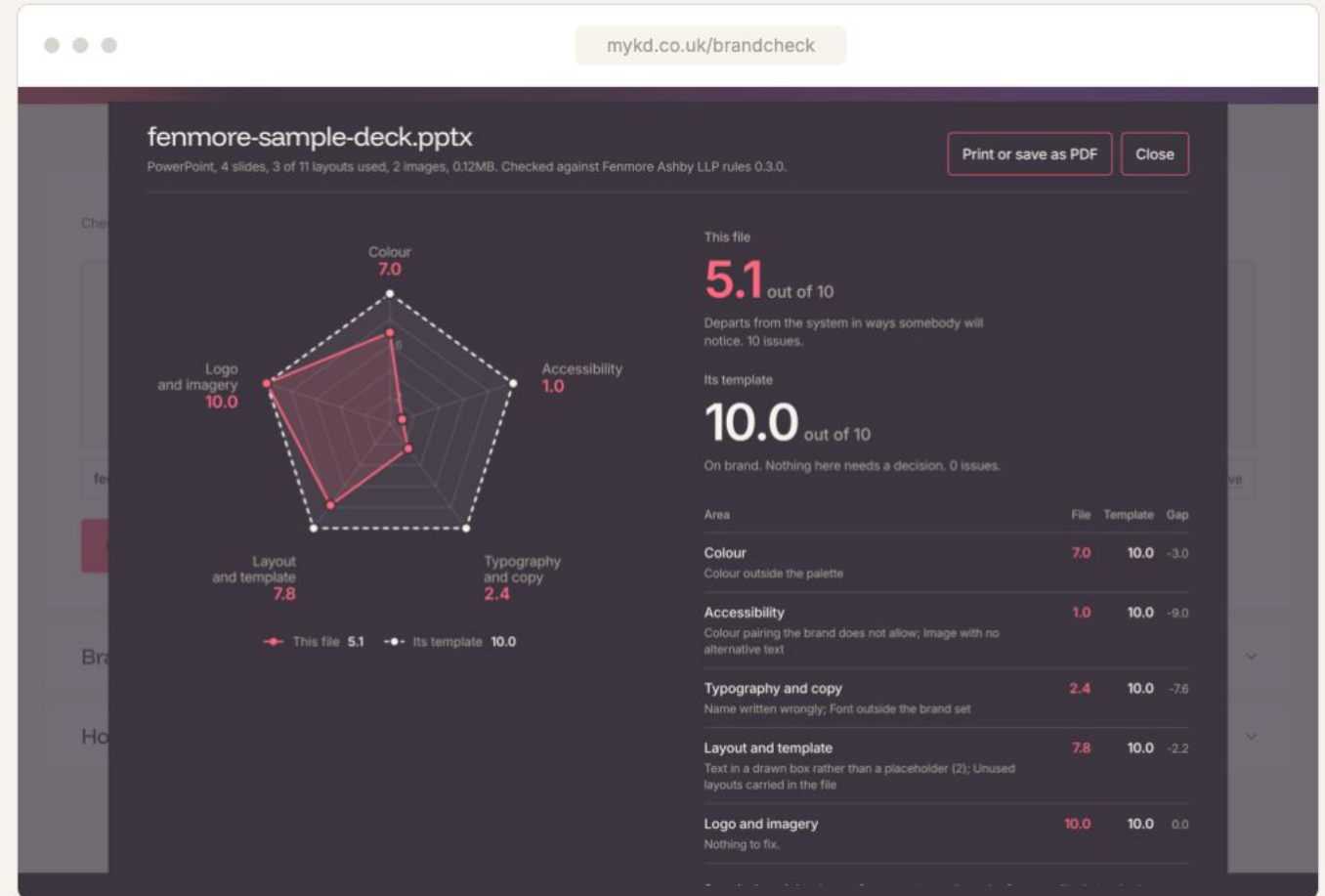
The firm's guidelines become one rules file. Every fix traces back to a rule.

02 Check the file

A deck, document, PDF or image gets a score by area and a numbered list of fixes. No upload, no account, and nothing leaves the machine.

03 Own the rules

The brand team owns the rules file, so the checker changes when the guidelines do.



Shown with Fenmore Ashby, a fictional law firm built into the demo.

Getting started

Where to go from here

-
- 01 Take the pulse at pulse.mykd.co.uk: a four minute reading of where the firm stands
 - 02 Fill in the four sums on page 17 with the firm's own figures
 - 03 Share this guide with the people in section 03 before the budget conversation
 - 04 Book the brand system diagnostic, with the brand or operations lead in the room
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Questions, or a conversation with the people who need convincing: michael@mykd.co.uk or 07568 651 698.

Thank you



Practice

Brand operations and design

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