



Labels, Labels, Labels

An informal research survey on gender-based entrepreneurial labels and their effect on brand.

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How to Create an Irresistible Brand on Any Budget**
(2010, Norlights Press)

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■ ■ ■ The Survey

Given the increase in women-owned businesses these days, Red Slice was interested in seeing what role gender – and motherhood status – plays in building a company brand as well as in audience perception.

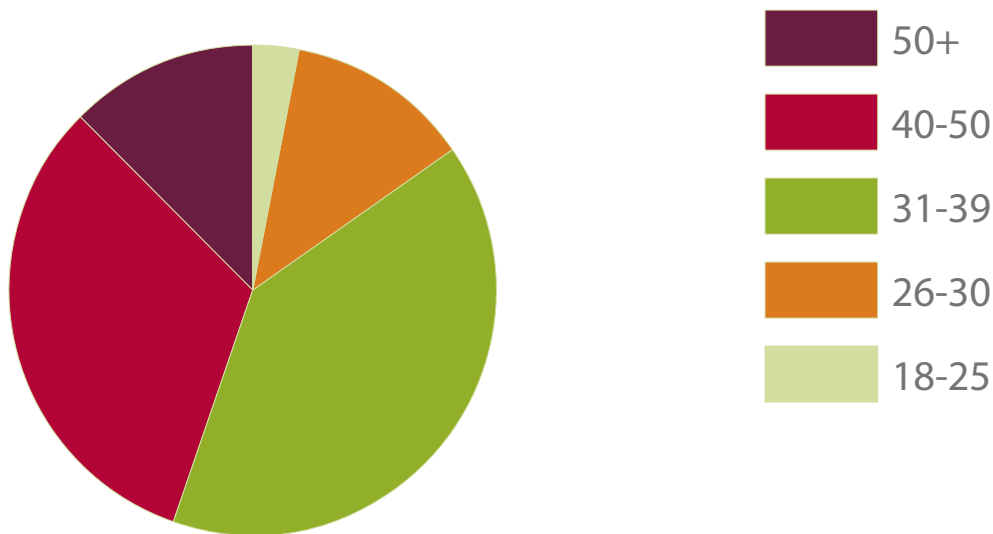
Anecdotally, I have seen many women out there who identify with “women entrepreneur,” “fempreneur,” or “momprenneur” titles and use this verbiage quite often in elevator pitches, on websites and in marketing materials. I was curious to see how women who own businesses feel about such gender-based terms and if such terms are embraced or do they, in fact, do the brand harm?

The online survey consisted of both check-box answers and free-form data fields for open commentary. Many of the most interesting results come from quotes in these fields.

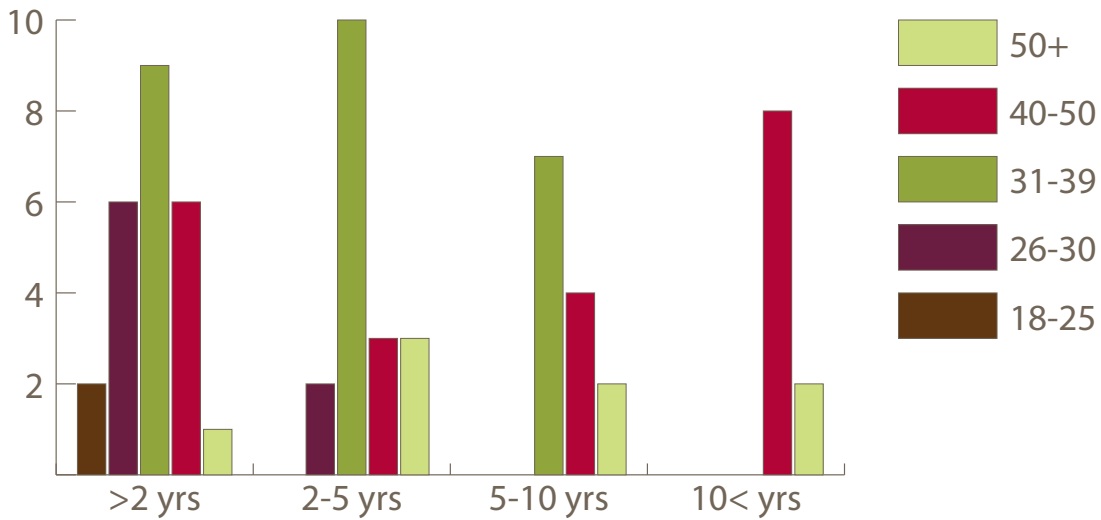
With a total of only 65 respondents, the findings herein are not statistically significant. But they do offer some interesting insights into what women who own their own businesses feel about gender-specific titles and brand labels.

■ ■ ■ The Numbers

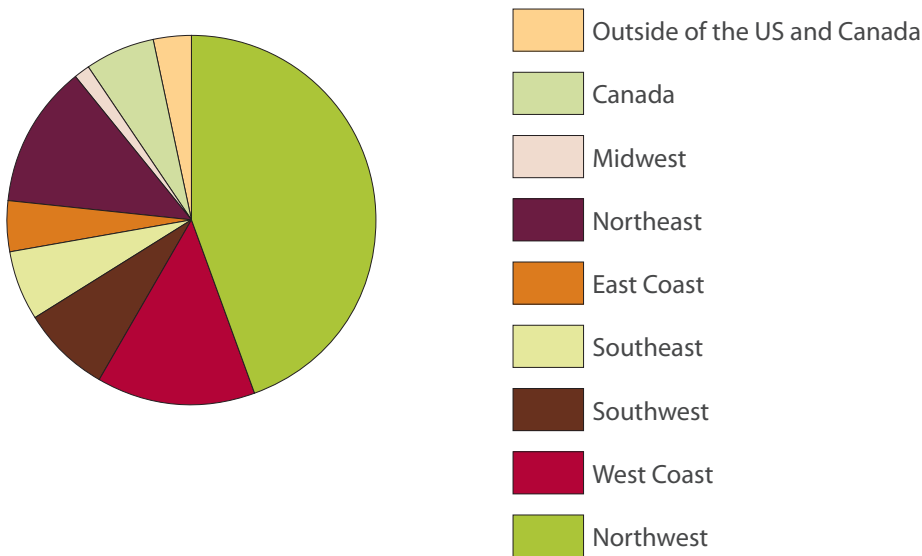
AGE: The highest number of respondents was between the ages of 31 and 39 (26, or 40%). Most (85%) were older than 30.



EXPERIENCE: The distribution of experience was more varied. The highest number of respondents had less than 2 years of experience in business. Splitting it up by age group, both of the 18-25 group had less than 2 years of experience. Of the 8 in the 26-30 category, 6 had less than 2 years' experience, and 2 had been in business for 2-5 years. Of the 26 in the 31-39 category, 9 had less than 2 years' experience, 10 had 2-5 years' experience, and 7 had 5-10 years' experience. For the 21 in the 40-50 category, 6 had been in business less than 2 years, 3 had 2-5 years' experience, 4 had 5-10 years' experience, and 8 had been in business for longer than 10 years. For the 50+ category, 1 had less than 2 years of experience, 3 had 2-5 years' experience, 2 had 5-10 years' experience, and 2 had over 10 years of experience.



LOCATION: Most of the respondents were from the Pacific Northwest.



FYI: There did not seem to be much correlation between opinions and the respondents' ages, geographic location, or length of time they have been in business.

BUSINESS OWNER/TARGET: Of the 65 respondents, 20 self-identified as woman-owned businesses, and 11 as “mommy-owned.” A majority of businesses targeted both men and women (42, 65%), while 13 respondents targeted women specifically and 5 targeted only mothers.

Woman-owned, 20 (31%)

Mom-owned, 11 (17%)

Targeting women, 13 (20%)

Targeting moms, 5 (8%)

Targeting both men and women 42 (65%)

TYPES OF BUSINESSES: The types of businesses that the respondents were involved with varied widely. There were those in marketing, consulting, PR, photography, graphic and web design, fashion, manufacturing, retail, health, nutrition, food, writing and event planning. Some created products for mothers, while some were in the business of helping other businesses become successful.

So, What Do They Think?

The results of this survey were interesting, but not surprising. The general trend seems to be that people did not like either the label “momprenneur” or “femprenneur” because they were limiting, though some thought that there were situations where such terms might be helpful. Many thought that using certain labels helped them connect with, find support from, and network with other people like them, but that in the wider business world, it was more often limiting than not. Respondents strongly disliked the term “femprenneur” and preferred “woman entrepreneur” or simply “entrepreneur,” seeing no reason to differentiate themselves from men entrepreneurs.

It was difficult to quantify how many people specifically liked or disliked the terms “momprenneur,” “femprenneur” or “woman entrepreneur” based on the survey terms because many people seemed to have chosen contradictory options. This is probably due to the fact that there are nuances to how people felt that wasn’t captured exactly in the options provided. Thus, most of the trending patterns are based on their free-form responses.

If Your Brand Relies On Your Being a Woman or Mother, Does This Help or Limit Your Business?

For those whose brand relied on them being a woman or a mother, out of 26 responses, 16 (62%) said that those labels definitely helped their businesses, while 6 (23%) said that it limited them. The other 4 (15%) said either that it didn’t help or hurt, or that it both helped and limited them in different ways.

Those who said it helped them stated that it did so because they were able to relate to clients and customers better, focus their attention on a particular audience, have a special expertise concerning their products, and stand out in a way that positively separated them from the competition.

Those who thought it was limiting said that it is because they didn’t want to be placed into a niche that might lead to a limiting of their audience. Others cited that the labels hurt their image, decreasing their being viewed as a legitimate business and thus losing investment and funding opportunities.

For those that were in the middle about it, some thought it helped them when they were dealing with other women or moms, but were hesitant to play up that aspect of their business when they dealt with men because it risked alienating a potential customer or client.

Some representative quotes:

“Helps! We’ve tested each product, and only carry items in the store if we’d recommend them, even purchase them ourselves. We aim to promote women/moms who have a professional drive that was biologically redirected when they become mothers.”

“I felt it limited my business. My company name used to be Career Women’s Initiative. I found it decreased the legitimacy of my work in professional services. Often people thought my focus was on work-life issues (I don’t in fact do any work in that area), and it hindered my ability to consult on business development topics.”

“I’m torn with this. I find the fact that I am a mother and a female attracts customers—but only females. The men don’t care or even ask, and I tend to hide the fact that I’m a mom from them at first. I am not sure that angle would work for men, and I am debating flaunting it more to get more female clients.”

Thoughts on the Term “Mompreneur”

There were very few respondents that liked the term without caveats (only 2 out of 42, or 5%), believing that it indicated that the business owner was good at multitasking. This was the opposite view for most people, even the ones that came down in the middle about it.

Many of the 29 (69%) who disliked the term did not like the word at all, saying that it reminded them of celebrity compound names (two of whom referred to the term “Brangelina” as an example), that it didn’t sound natural, and that it sounded like a gimmick. Other reasons for disliking it were that many believed it made one’s business sound like more of a hobby than an actual business; many “mompreneur” groups felt exclusive and were not serious, focusing more on the mom aspect of their members, and less on the entrepreneur side; the label limited the appeal of the product, and also indicated that the business owner had other obligations that might come before those of her business (e.g. her children, her home life), causing her to lose credibility in the eyes of current and potential customers/clients; the label was demeaning to mothers and women; and that it has nothing to do with what their businesses represent.

For the 11 (26%) who thought there were good and bad aspects to the label, many cited the same reasons for disliking it as those who did not like it at all. They believed it could be positive if their audience was other mothers, e.g. if their products were for babies, young children or parents of babies/young children, because it would help them relate to their audience. Otherwise they felt that the term shouldn’t be used, or at the very least, applied to people who did not define themselves as “mompreneurs.”

Representative quotes:

“I believe that in today’s environment, the ‘mompreneur’ movement shows to what extent women will work (and work very hard) to try and have it all—a family AND a career they are passionate about. When I know a woman is actually a mompreneur, I think WOW, there’s a woman who’s going for it.”

“I liked it at first but now I’m kind of over it. It only works when you’re in a room full of mom owned businesses, and many of my entrepreneur friends feel left out, or make a yucky face when I mention it. I think they feel it’s a club and they don’t belong. I used to feel good about being in the club, but after attending a few mompreneur-centered events and expos, I like the camaraderie with the other women but I’d rather just get on with my business and hit my numbers.”

“I can’t stand it! It sounds so annoying and not serious, in my opinion. About 9 years ago, when I was pregnant with my first child, I first started hearing about it. And I liked it then. However, now, it seems very amateur to me. Yes, I am a mother to two great kids but even if I had a business that was aimed at moms, I would NOT call myself a mompreneur. To me it screams of teddy bears holding balloons and women doing direct sales businesses...even if it isn’t true of all mompreneurs.”

“When I started my own business, I was also a brand new mom so I found a lot of comfort in being around other moms given that it was such a new identity. However, over the last year, I have found a frustration with attending groups with those names, as the bulk of the meetings seem to attract people with very small and unsuccessful businesses (which is not very inspiring or educational for me). Brutal I know—but the truth.”

Thoughts on the Term “Fempreneur” or “Woman Entrepreneur”

Though most people said they had never heard the term “fempreneur” before, it was almost universally reviled. Many do not like the sound of it, and think it is “sexist,” bizarrely sexual-sounding, “gimmicky,” “silly,” unserious, “derogatory,” and reminds one respondent of feminine hygiene products. Thus, the numbers that follow reflect the term “woman entrepreneur.”

17 out of 42 respondents (40%) liked the “woman entrepreneur” label and would use the term to describe themselves. Reasons cited include that the term is factual and describes what they in fact are; that it is a good way to build relationships with other women business owners; that it is a celebratory term that not only shows how far women have come, but also can inspire and empower other women and girls to think that being a business owner is a possibility; and that it helps one stand out in a sea of competitors.

14 respondents (33%) didn’t like the term “woman entrepreneur” because it put women in a separate category from men, as if it was unusual for a woman to go into business (a few mentioned that no one described themselves as a “man entrepreneur”); it reminds them of some women entrepreneur groups that can be exclusive and cliquy; and it limits their ability to appeal to and connect with a wider market.

11 respondents (26%) did not feel strongly either way, saying either that it didn’t matter or that there were situations where one could benefit from calling oneself a “woman entrepreneur,” but also situations where it would be detrimental, for the same reasons already mentioned above.

Representative quotes:

“The ‘women’s movement’ was attempting to get the culture to change and allow women to do and be all that they could and wanted to do and be—without regard to ‘gender.’ By separating ourselves and being WOMEN entrepreneurs, as opposed to simply ‘entrepreneurs,’ we are stepping back and allowing gender to become a wedge between us again. I really think that once someone talks to me, they realize I AM a ‘woman’ entrepreneur and not a ‘man’ entrepreneur. I think it is negative.”

“Like the term ‘women entrepreneur’, dislike ‘fempreneur’. I think it’s good to add value to women as business owners, but on the other hand, it is limiting in certain situations. For example, if I’m doing a presentation for all women in reference to a women’s empowerment retreat, the term is used, recognized and appreciated. If I’m catering to a mixed group, I wouldn’t push the fact that I was a woman business owner/trainer as it may turn my male clients away or even give the wrong impression.”

“Give me a break. Really? Where are all the ‘manpreneurs’? And what’s next? ‘obesepreneur’, ‘blackpreneur’, ‘Christianpreneur’? These types of labels look like a cry for help from a person who should not be taken seriously.”

“I think that pointing out that an entrepreneur is a woman will only strengthen our ability to further our success in business in the future. Pointing out the fact that women can be and have been very successful entrepreneurs will help us fight the unfortunate bias that still exists against women in business. I don’t love the term ‘fempreneur’ because I don’t really see the need for a “catchy” name. We are women. We are entrepreneurs. Done.”

“I think women are creative and that is evidenced by all the ways we have changed words to fit us better. Fempreneur, or Femmepreneur, or whatever spelling invented, may say ‘trying too hard’ to some people. But I think it says, ‘I’m so badass, you (English language) don’t even have a word for me yet.’”

Conclusion

These findings, again while not statistically significant, show me that these gender-based terms may have had a place at one time, but are quickly falling out of favor as a brand self-identifier. However, many of the respondents who have businesses specifically aimed at women or mothers still felt positively about these terms. In that case, I have to conclude that they are being reduced to marketing messages for specific audiences and are losing their shine as entrepreneurial badges of merit.

Overall, I think more people were positive or neutral with “women entrepreneur” as a fact-based identifier but not as accepting of made-up terms like “mompreneur” and “fempreneur,” citing that they sounded like the words were “trying too hard.” In most of the responses, women business owners were proud of the strides made by women and moms in starting businesses and in creating a shared community. But some felt those communities have now become ways to divide or to place a wedge in the entrepreneurial community as a whole. Most of the negativity around these terms boiled down to two causes: 1) separating women business owners out as an “exception” to the rule or 2) connotations that the business was just a “hobby” and not to be taken seriously. Even some who were positive on the titles acknowledged that these perceptions might exist.

What is shared, however, is refraining from using such titles in mixed company to avoid alienating male audiences or narrowing their market and audience opportunities. This seemed to be true whether the business was targeted to women or not. For example, if someone attended a networking event, they might not introduce themselves as a “mompreneur” when meeting a male contact. This further convinces me that many women are prone to use these terms as brand marketing messages - only meant for prospective customers - if they sell to women and moms.

What do you think of the terms “women entrepreneur,” “fempreneur” or “mompreneur?” Drop me an email at info@red-slice.com and let me know your thoughts, or post a Wall Comment on our Red Slice Nation Facebook page: www.facebook.com/redslice.



About Red Slice

Red Slice is a branding, marketing and communications consultancy that advises businesses on how to build fresh brands, create winning marketing strategies, and craft effective messaging. Red Slice is the fruit of marketing expert Maria Ross, a marketing veteran who loves to work with businesses on how to tell their unique stories. Maria is a consultant, speaker, writer and the author of *Branding Basics for Small Business: How to Create an Irresistible Brand on Any Budget* (2010, Norlights Press).

Her eclectic mix of creativity and business savvy helps your business engage, inform and delight customers so they keep coming back for more. Armed with time-tested marketing acumen, innovative ideas and a network of talented specialists at the ready, she offers strategies that get results. And the Red Slice network includes talented writers, online experts, designers and direct marketing gurus who can execute on those plans.

What valuable services can Red Slice offer my business?

Maria brainstorms ideas, asks tough questions, clarifies objectives and focuses you on your ideal audience. Clients get clear action steps and recommended resources. Leveraging her marketing experience with small local businesses, to VC funded start-ups, to large public companies and as a former management consultant with Accenture, Maria offers valuable advice around:

- Marketing and launching your new business
- Developing a solid brand that makes you stand out
- Refreshing an existing brand and messaging
- Targeting your ideal customer or client
- Crafting effective messaging to parlay into website copy, elevator pitches, etc.

For more information visit: www.red-slice.com

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Who are Red Slice's clients?

Maria has worked with some of the biggest brands on the planet, like Microsoft, Monster.com, Business Objects (an SAP company) and Discovery Networks. She has also worked with many technology and eCommerce start-ups. Maria's philosophy is that good branding follows the same fundamentals whether your company has 1 employee or 5000, so she uses her broad experience to guide clients large and small to success. She brings her corporate experience to bear for emerging small businesses and solopreneurs. Clients include Talent Technology, Anodia, Mudbay, CRAVE, Dot Girl Products, Geedra, It's Eventful and CareerBranches.

"Working with Maria transformed my business. She taught me that clarity around your branding story is a critical component to the success of your business. The process with Maria enabled me to break through my fears and expand the concept of what is possible for my business. The result - Alinga went from a small hidden space to a modern wellness studio that embodies the Alinga brand in every way."

—Andrea Rae, Owner, Alinga Bodywork

"Working with Red Slice helped me to focus on what makes my company special. They helped me to really understand who my target client was, so I could better attract those people into my practice. They also worked with me on my key messages – from business plan to elevator speech to website content – clarifying the offerings and benefits so that my potential clients can easily see how I can help them. I am constantly complemented on my messaging— people say they "get it," which is often tough to get across in my industry."

—Rebecca Rodskog, Change Agent & Life Coach,
Rodskog Change Consulting

"Maria has a way with words – and is my go-to creative brainstorming partner when I need to think about new ways to market my business. She asks the right questions and constantly gets you to think about your brand and ideal audience to ensure every marketing move you make is a smart one."

—Melody Biringer, Founder; CRAVE