

THE JUICY GUIDE TO **BRAND BUILDING**

ADVICE ON HOW TO:  
**ATTRACT LOYAL FANS**  
— **AND** —

**AMPLIFY  
YOUR MESSAGE**



**MARIA ROSS**

# The Juicy Guide to Brand Building: Advice on How to Attract Loyal Fans and Amplify Your Message

Maria Ross

Published by Red Slice Press, Pacifica, CA

Copyright ©2015 Maria Ross

All rights reserved.

Cover design by Liana Moisescu; Cover image by Freepik.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without the prior written permission of the Publisher. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be emailed to [info@red-slice.com](mailto:info@red-slice.com).

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

## Table of Contents

SO YOU WANT TO BUILD A BRAND.....	4
WHAT IS A BRAND STRATEGY? .....	7
WHY SAVING MONEY ON BRANDING CAN COST YOU .....	10
5 BRANDING MYTHS...SHATTERED.....	12
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DON'T MATCH YOUR BRAND .....	15
4 WAYS TO BUILD YOUR THOUGHT LEADER BRAND.....	17
BE INTERESTED TO BE INTERESTING.....	20
IS ACCOUNTABILITY DEAD?.....	21
7 SIMPLE AND STUNNING BLOG POST IDEAS TO KEEP YOUR IDEAS FLOWING.....	23
3 TIPS FOR A SIZZLING PERSONAL BRAND.....	26
3 THINGS YOU MUST DO FOR YOUR BRAND STORY TO BLOOM.....	28
WHAT'S YOUR BRAND POSITION? 5 MOVES YOU CAN TRY.....	30
BOOST YOUR BRAND: 3 TIPS TO MAKE BLOGGING EASIER .....	33
4 TIPS TO CREATE MAGNETIC BRAND MESSAGING.....	35
FINDING YOUR BRAND VOICE.....	37
THE SECRET TO DIFFERENTIATING YOUR BRAND? YOU.....	38
IS YOUR BRAND A "BAD BOY?" 3 SIGNS YOU MIGHT BE BREAKING HEARTS.....	40
BRAND BUILDING VS. RANDOM TACTICS .....	43
HOW TO SEPARATE THE FOUNDER FROM THE BRAND .....	44
HOW TO PASS THE BRAND TORCH FROM "THE FOUNDER" TO "THE COMPANY" .....	46
BRAND IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER.....	48
WHAT'S YOUR "HOOK"? IF YOU DON'T KNOW, HOW WILL YOUR CUSTOMERS?.....	50

BRAND MESSAGING MADE SIMPLE: CAN A SIX-YEAR-OLD UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU DO? .....	51
CLOSING THOUGHTS AND BOOK EXTRAS.....	53
ABOUT THE AUTHOR, MARIA ROSS.....	55
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	56

## So You Want to Build a Brand...

Branding seems to be all the rage these days, doesn't it? What with blogging, selfies, and baring our souls on social media, people—and businesses—want to build a very **transparent connection with their audience**. It doesn't matter whether you own a business, lead a non-profit or simply want to launch your book, art, or speaking career: You have something special to promote and, therefore, you must build a brand to attract an audience for it.

**Don't get caught up in the terminology.** *Brand* is simply your essence and reputation. What springs to mind when people think of you, your cause, project or work? What is that image you want to create? Can you deliver upon it? How will you walk, talk and act to consistently communicate that brand through everything you do?

When you think of Disney you might think of magic, family fun and fantastical experiences. Nike might evoke sports, fitness and a fierce attitude. Perhaps Tiffany and Co. evokes timeless elegance, romance...and Audrey Hepburn.

When people see your name, logo or next big thing, what do you want them to associate with you?

Ta da! That's brand!

This book is a collection of my best content about brand-building, designed to help you attract just the right audience and amplify your message for maximum impact. But who am I to help you build your brand?

### My Brand-Building Story

I started my brand consultancy in 2008 and you could say it was accidental. Sort of. Really, there are no accidents and the idea to hang out my own shingle and help businesses create brand and marketing strategies always seemed a pipe dream. My corporate career was extremely successful—taking me from a management consultant at a top-tier global firm, to a marketing manager at Discovery Networks (yay, Animal Planet!) to Account Manager at a small ad agency and then eight years as a Silicon Valley marketing executive. I lived through the technology boom and bust **and always landed on my feet. But I'd often get bored quickly or look to the next new adventure.** And, perhaps like you, I longed for more freedom in my schedule to pursue other passions: in my case, writing and acting.

Red Slice started as a personal blog full of whimsical wine, film and cultural musings. It then became a business website I would tinker with on the side as I dreamed, *"If I worked for myself, how would I position my services? What message would I want to*

*convey? What brand would I build?*" I knew I wanted to build something fresh, smart and practical. A brand that reflected my voice, which was at times energetic, funny, to-the-point and full of tough love.

When the writing was on the wall and my last tech company laid off the marketing department in prep for a sale, opportunity knocked. I flipped the switch on that hidden website and Red Slice as a brand consultancy was born. And because I had put so much thought into my desired brand strategy—even before I ever launched the business—making marketing, service and content choices was simple from that day forward. My brand strategy was my compass, enabling me to make clear, easy and effective decisions rather than spinning my wheels. This is **what I'd love for you to experience as well—if you think ahead.**

**Brand-building Truth #1: Putting time and thought into a brand strategy *before* you spend a single dollar on design, advertising or promotion will save you thousands of dollars—and your sanity. It will ensure that every move you make is thoughtful and effective.**

Fast-forward all these years and I've been fortunate to work with fabulous and passionate clients all over the world. I've crafted brand stories that have resulted in joyful client screams, and even a few tears (the good kind). Many of my amazing clients have since built successful brands and this never fails to thrill me, even now. It's been an honor to delight large crowds and be interviewed on national TV, as well as on countless podcasts and talk radio shows. Oh, and I have become a published author. I'm blessed.

The road was not always easy. Maybe you can relate to this: I am often still unsure of **what the hell I'm doing. But I stayed the course and kept my brand clear and consistent.** And over time, I became *known* for my brand. Clients, media and conferences sought me out because my brand established a clear expectation of the value I deliver. They knew me from my refreshing fruit imagery. They heard me speak about putting strategy before tactics if you wanted to be irresistible. They liked my brand personality and tone of voice. They knew I specialized in small business, startups and fast-growth companies.

And most importantly: price never became an issue because my brand clearly communicated **high-end quality, practical results...and a side of snarky humor.** Anyone concerned with cutting corners or get-rich-quick schemes knows that Red Slice is not for them.

**Brand-building Truth #2: When you create a clear and consistent brand over time, you will establish the right expectation and attract the right audience. And word will spread.**

This Juicy Guide series is designed to help you on your own entrepreneurial journey. **And I mean “entrepreneurial” in whatever form that means for you:** starting a business or a non-profit, working as a freelancer, launching a big project, or even selling your art as an author, actor or artist, which requires you to *think* like a business owner. Building a strong brand strategy is going to be the cornerstone to your success—even **if you don’t consider yourself a business owner or marketing expert. In these pages,** you will find some of my best brand-building content that will hopefully guide, inform and delight you. Think of this eBook as a virtual coffee date, where you can pick my brain for some fabulous advice!

**You have a passion and a purpose for delivering something. If you didn’t you wouldn’t** be reading this book. How you present this to the world can make all the difference to its success or failure. **That is what effective branding is all about: ensuring you communicate the right message, to the right people at the right time so you can compel them to action.** Hopefully the lessons and tips in these pages will help you ignite your brand and focus your efforts.

If it does, please kindly share your thoughts with an Amazon review and recommend this book to other folks you may know who need to build a brand, attract a following **and get their message heard. You’ll soon find, if you haven’t already, that one** of the coolest perks of an entrepreneurial lifestyle is the willingness to share resources with each other.

**And you are invited to join my Red Slice Nation email tribe for regular wit, wisdom and insights.** We are a community of rockstars and changemakers out to create, invent and delight. At Red Slice, I serve up business and brand advice, with a side of inspiration for accomplishing whatever your big dream might be. I may not have all the answers, but I can point you in the right direction and am happy to share **resources and lessons that will help you on your journey. We’re all in this together.**

Please share any and all of your feedback with me on Twitter [@redslice](https://twitter.com/redslice). Would love to hear from you!

Best,  
*Maria Ross*

## What Is a Brand Strategy?

Having done branding, marketing and communications work for over 20 years, there are things I take for granted. Like bantering around terms that I assume everyone understands. My friend and colleague, the brilliant writer and content marketing expert [Sarah Von Bargen](#), pointed out to me that perhaps a little terminology revisit would help you build that irresistible brand and booming business you desire.

See? Even experts need their butts kicked every now and then!

So let's start at the very beginning and tackle the most common question I get, the one upon which my consulting practice is based: *What is a brand strategy? What does it look like and why do I need one?*

To answer that, let's first define *brand*: Your brand is your core, your essence. It's the cornerstone of your company and informs everything from who you target to how you price to what your website looks like to...well, every other business decision you need to make, big and small. And not just marketing ones, either.

If you think of your brand as your business' soul or reputation, you can see how this informs the way you look, talk and act as a company. Or as I like to say, how you communicate visually, verbally and experientially.

### **Without a firm brand foundation, your business "house" will be built on shifting sands**

A brand strategy is a statement of direction that answers key questions around why you exist, what you stand for, who you target, what value you provide, your pricing and packaging strategy and what personality or vibe in which you will wrap that all up and present it to the world. You want one because it guides your marketing, operational and even hiring and partnership decisions. Without one, every opportunity and road looks like a good one and you will run yourself ragged trying to blindly figure out the right move to make next. Like a compass, a Brand Strategy helps you say yes to the right things and no to the wrong things so you not only save money and time, but your specific actions are much more targeted and effective.

Simply put, a Brand Strategy prevents you from performing random acts of marketing and getting distracted by every new shiny object.

Remember: the *format* of a Brand Strategy is not the most important thing. Yours can be three paragraphs, two pages or even a slide deck or other graphic format, if you happen to be a visual person. What matters is that it answers high-level questions



such as who you are, whom you serve and the value you offer. At a detailed level, it should outline:

- Your mission/vision/values (also know as *your reason for being*)
- Your ideal customer profiles
- Your benefits and unique differentiators
- Your brand personality, voice and tone
- Your pricing and packaging strategy
- Your key messages

In some cases, I also advise creating a brief **Brand Positioning Statement** that wraps up all your answers in a simple paragraph form. The BPS is meant to be an internal-**only statement that guides your company decisions going forward. Please don't** confuse a Brand Positioning Statement with a *tagline*: a tagline is an external, catchy marketing statement that conveys your brand to the world. Your tagline (and other brand messaging, for that matter) is *based* on your Brand Positioning Statement.

**Here's an example of an internal Brand Positioning Statement from a prior client of mine:**

*"COMPANY is the Anthropologie of the bodywork field, offering a unique, creative, individual approach to bodywork (massage, Reiki and BodyTalk) combined with attentive and personalized service that is in tune with the way you express yourself and your personal truth. It provides high value, yet affordable services to busy women that go beyond just surface pampering to something deeper and more lasting. Unlike pure massage therapists, Andrea uses the body as an access point to specifically identify what is holding you back by releasing physical tension and unprocessed emotions. This release helps you get unstuck creatively and emotionally. Sessions at COMPANY provide a lasting investment in your self-development that goes beyond pure pampering.*

*COMPANY is focused on balance, action, forward movement, and progress. It propels clients to the next level by shifting them out of stagnation and into action, in their lives or work, using a body-centered approach to process the physical and emotional/energetic issues holding them back. It opens them up to new possibilities, giving them the clarity and the confidence to manifest a new reality, whether that be launching or expanding a business, jumping feet first into exploring art, music, or higher education, or creating space in daily life to be more present in the moment and connected to the body."*

You can think of a Brand Strategy as your internal bible or **"rallying cry"** for making the right business and marketing decisions. The more clarity you have on your Brand Strategy and **where your brand "fits" in the landscape of your industry**, the more you will attract the right people with the right message at the right time. Otherwise, good

luck navigating the marketing maze of options that exists today. You need a compass...and a Brand Strategy will give you one.

## Why Saving Money on Branding Can Cost You

We've all seen it—and some of us have probably done it. We spend money on lawyers or accountants to build our business the right way, but when it comes to something like a logo or a website, we think, “Why, my neighbor’s teenage niece knows how to use Illustrator! Maybe she can do my logo for free.” Or, “I need to get a simple website up. Let me just slap together a DIY template as that’s all I will really need.”

While these are steps you may need to take initially to get your business off the ground and money coming in the door, skimping on a well-thought-out and intentional brand strategy long-term can cost you way more in sales later on. This fundamental mistake is what inspired me to write my book, [\*Branding Basics for Small Business\*](#).

Branding does not have to be some big expensive effort that only large companies can afford. If you run a small business, you need to spend time thinking about and conveying your brand as well—at whatever budget you have to spend.

**Brand is more than just your logo or website—it’s your essence, your core. It’s the experience people have with you, the impression you leave in their minds.**

You need to intentionally think about what you want that impression to be and ensure that you communicate it consistently in three important ways: **visually, verbally and experientially**. Only with consistent exposure to your brand promise in every touchpoint will customers connect with you and become rabid fans, thus increasing your profits long-term.

And while brand is more than the visual identity, your design look is still a key part of it. Buyers make decisions subconsciously and need to be attracted to your look and feel first before they will learn enough to buy from you. Just like dating, your appearance does not define who you are but it does factor in to initial first impressions. So why do so many entrepreneurs try to cut corners on the very first thing that potential customers will see?

**Hiring unqualified people or designers who don’t ask you anything about your value proposition, differentiators, or target audience is not the way to save money.** I talk to many people that threw away money because their brand strategy was not baked yet. **Good design is a skill: it’s a skill that involves taking a message and communicating it visually, not just creating a pretty picture.** You will lose more in sales by getting this part wrong than you will save on cutting corners.

And guess what? That brand strategy will do more than just inform your visual identity. It will serve as a compass for other marketing investments: partners,

advertising, or events. Basically any decision your company makes will be a smarter one if you start with the brand strategy first and use it as a compass. This helps you **avoid throwing away money on what I call “random acts of marketing”** and ensures that you only invest in activities that move your business forward.

**If you need to save money, the best thing entrepreneurs can do is to first sit down and create a clear, strong brand strategy before any marketing, design or development takes place.** This entails defining who you are, what you represent, what feelings you want to evoke, what value you provide, how you price things, who your ideal audience is, and how to best reach them. This requires sitting down and answering some key questions. People who **don’t do this first and launch into creating** a website or investing in marketing programs are just throwing their money away. When you have no destination, every road looks like it leads somewhere.

Know thy audience and thy [brand strategy](#) and you will know the best design options, communication vehicles and marketing tactics in which to invest. Translation: only pay for things that will move you forward and give you a return on your investment. Saving \$1000 and then ultimately losing \$10,000 in sales opportunities because you **didn’t connect with your target customer** does not seem like a good investment strategy to me.

## 5 Branding Myths...Shattered

People sometimes let the myths get in the way of the reality when it comes to branding. And it makes me very sad.

When people think branding, they often just think it's a logo or business card. Or they think of the opposite extreme like Apple or Virgin and assume they will never have the big budgets to "brand effectively." While dazzling branding is more than just pretty pictures, it is also something that is easily attainable, if you put the right thought and effort into it.

Dispelling five popular myths about branding is key to starting that process and transforming your work:

### Myth #1: Branding is hard

Branding is not rocket science. It simply requires focused thought about what you want your business to stand for and to whom, and then a commitment to communicate that message through everything you do visually and experientially. With my clients, I offer a simple ten-step process for building an irresistible brand strategy. But once built, you are never "done" nor do you ever stop being a steward for your brand once all the processes, websites and logos are in place. You need to constantly be vigilant and regularly do a "system check" on your materials, business practices, customer service and messaging to ensure your brand is clear and consistent. You also need to commit to living your values and ensuring all of your employees and partners can verbalize and live those values as well.

### Myth #2: Branding is expensive

Effective branding can be done on any budget. I've worked with \$12 million dollar budgets and \$1000 budgets. The real key to effective branding is making sure you know your ideal audience in sharp detail and that your messages speak directly to their needs and the benefits they value. Once you have those thoughts together, you can then work more effectively with a designer to put together your logo or website and a writer to craft your copy. Consistency and clarity in messaging (both the visual and verbal kind) is what makes a brand effective and creates rabid fans and evangelists, not how much money you spend promoting it. So if you can only spend \$200 on a logo, you can still ensure it communicates exactly what you want it to and that it's aimed to attract the right people. True, you may not be able to do multi-million ad campaigns or sponsor extravagant sporting events. But with clear, consistent and strong messages, you ensure that even those three or four activities which you can afford are laser-focused.

In addition, since brand is more than just your logo or advertising, you can live your brand through company culture and processes. You can easily and cheaply craft a voicemail message or email signature that furthers that brand. You can extend the brand to social media and capture customers with limited dollars. And you can ensure your quality and price maps consistently to your brand promise. Those are all things you need to do anyway to run your business, so you may as well align them to a strong brand for maximum “oomph.”

### Myth #3: Branding is just fluff

Brand equity can make or break a company. And if you think branding has no financial impact, just ask private equity firms who “buy” brands for billions of dollars, all for the brand cache or loyal customer base. It’s the reason people will pay three times as much for a white t-shirt at Nordstrom than they would at Target. Brand translates into bottom-line sales when done effectively. You can’t deny that if you build a strong foundation and communicate it to the right people at the right time, you will attract just the interested customer you seek. In addition, a strong brand guides all the other marketing decisions that fuel your company’s growth: where to advertise, who to partner with, how to price your product, etc.

### Myth #4: All designers are the same

All designers and branding firms *are not* the same. While you can save lots of money thinking through a brand strategy on your own before you engage with a designer on communicating anything visually, some designers get it **and some don’t**. And sometimes, you get what you pay for in this regard. If you are talking to a designer who does not ask who your target audience is or what you are trying to convey to them through your visual elements—merely asking you what colors or concepts you “like”—you need to run the other way. While you might be spending only \$100 and think it’s a steal, you will lose more in sales and customers by not communicating the right visual message. Good designers understand how imagery, font, color and spacing impact the subconscious connections people will make about your company and what it offers. They should be experienced enough to make clear recommendations in that regard. It’s worth it to spend a bit more if you can and work with an expert who asks the right questions.

### Myth #5: Branding works immediately

Branding and direct response marketing are two different things. People need to experience your brand multiple times before it sticks. It needs to be consistently out in the world, present in every customer touch point, before you can decide if it works or not. Branding is about awareness and “mindshare”—which spaces do you occupy in people’s minds when they see your logo or hear your name? This takes time! The Nike swoosh did not have meaning within the first three months it appeared. Avoid the temptation to change branding every few months in an effort to chase quarterly sales

growth or fads. Yes, if you get feedback that things are not working, you can make changes, but hopefully, you will have put the upfront thought into the brand strategy before implementing it, so that only slight tweaks are required. Branding and messaging can be refreshed over time—but not before customers get a chance to respond to it. And while you might be sick of your brand and messaging after three months, remember, your potential customers may not even have seen it yet, with all the noise that is in the marketplace.

**Don't let these five common myths get in the way of building an irresistible brand that your audience will adore and that will make your efforts a smashing success.**

## What Happens When You Don't Match Your Brand

A friend recently passed along this moving story about branding gone bad.

Last year, this friend-of-a-friend found herself sniffing into a tissue at the first of many therapy sessions, pouring her heart out on topics like identity and authenticity. This, in and of itself, isn't particularly noteworthy; many of us have found ourselves on a therapist's couch.

But her friend was in therapy *because of her brand*.

See, her funny, ballsy, brassy friend spent almost a decade building a demure, buttoned-up brand. For ten years, her products were featured by Martha Stewart and Oprah and sweater set-types bought her pieces in bulk. She'd attend networking events and people would swarm her, asking for advice about breaking into the industry she didn't even like. Left to her own devices, she'd live in Levis and t-shirts, eating only buffalo wings and beer.

Instead, she felt she needed to wear heels and dresses, drink \$13 cocktails and schmooze with wedding planners. She needed to reign in her swearing and act like she cared about manicures.

When I heard this story, I realized many of you may go through this and it is a recipe for disaster. Her company was successful but she was unstable and unhappy. Every single day, she felt like a fraud.

Thankfully, this story has a happy ending. Her friend went through a year of therapy, eventually shuttered her company, and got a 9-to-5 at a creative agency. These days, she's living the jeans-wearing, wing-eating dream.

**This is a real, life and blood example of what can happen if you build a brand that runs counter to who you are. It can destroy you.**

And it could happen to any of us! We get caught up following business advice that—while solid—just isn't right for us. Or we work with a super-talented, slightly pushy designer and end up with a gorgeous website that's perfect...for someone else.

This can also happen if you work for a company whose values and brand image run counter to what you believe, who you are and what you stand for. And if you own the company? This could be happening to employees you've hired who were never the right cultural fit to begin with—and that's when it starts impacting their productivity and work.



So before you find yourself in a pile of tear-filled Kleenexes or on the therapist's couch, here are four questions to ask yourself as you brand:

### When I look at my site, does it feel like *me*?

Are the colors ones I wear or use in real life? Do my headshots really look like me? Does my copy include words that I use in my daily life?

If you're not a particularly buttoned up, corporate person, you needn't convince the internet that you are. And if you're a sweet, modest person, don't let your site paint you as a gregarious extravert.

Just because you work in a traditional industry, doesn't mean *you're* traditional and it doesn't mean your brand needs to be. [Laura Simms](#) is a successful career coach who shares [photos of her pet rabbit](#) on Instagram. [Danielle LaPorte](#) runs a million dollar business while showcasing her tattoos and dropping the F-bomb. We feel like we know, like, and trust these women because they're showing us who they really are.

### Do the people who know me best think it looks and feels like me?

We all suffer from forest-for-the-trees syndrome from time to time. Ask your partner, your best friend, and maybe your mom to take a look at your online space. What do they think? Does it ring true for them? Or are you nearly unrecognizable?

Of course, you should take every opinion with a grain of salt, but if everyone in your life is confused by your blazer-wearing headshot and your jargon-filled Twitter bio, it might be time to reconsider.

### Do I really, actually like providing these services?

There's a lot of wisdom in creating a scalable business and leading large workshops—but if you're an introvert, leading a group might feel like an ill-fitting suit. Likewise, if you don't like big, on-going projects you might not want to have clients on retainer.

It's possible to like doing something—writing, design, coding, marketing—but not really enjoy the way you're delivering those services. Think about how you thrive and how you like to arrange your day and then design offerings accordingly.

### Do I feel like I can be myself with my clients, on social media, on my blog?

Do you feel like you can talk about [your love of wine](#)? Or CrossFit? Or share funny photos of your dog? Can you make a *Walking Dead* reference or drop the occasional curse word? It's important that you show and tell your clients who you really are. There's a 99% chance they'll love you!

## 4 Ways to Build Your Thought Leader Brand

If you're a consultant of any persuasion, you have probably heard this ad nauseum:

*You have to establish yourself as a thought leader.*

Let's break down what this really means, why thought leadership matters and how you can build a thought leader brand.

### Thought Leadership Defined

Thought leadership is simply establishing yourself as the expert in your chosen field, not just on the products or services you sell. It means people come to you for your **thoughts or take on things that happen in your industry**. If you're a dog training expert, you might be asked to comment on a recent dog fighting bust and how those dogs will be rehabilitated. If you're a health and wellness thought leader, reporters might seek you out for your opinion on the latest Hollywood fitness craze. If you're a financial expert, people may clamor to hear how you interpret the proposed changes to international tax laws.

### Why Does Thought Leadership Matter?

People want to hear from thought leaders. You can score lots of brand awareness by being quoted in the press, speaking at conferences or [authoring a book](#). Maybe your **particular service or product will grow stale or fall out of fashion**: if you're a thought leader in your overall area of expertise, you can constantly evolve, create ancillary products or services, and build longevity.

### A thought leadership brand has a lot of legs and room to grow.

When brand news breaks, I am honored to be asked for my opinion. People have come to me and asked for my perspectives on news such as the [Susan Komen debacle](#) or the [Lance Armstrong brand wreck](#). But things didn't start out that way...

### How to Build Your Thought Leadership Street Cred

If you want to be a thought leader, you first need to consider what you want to be known for—and if you truly have expertise in that arena. Hmmm...that sounds an awful lot like your [brand strategy](#), doesn't it?

(I'm going to assume here that you want to establish yourself as a thought leader in an area in which you truly have experience, wisdom and value to share. If you're trying to establish thought leadership as a marketing gimmick to "get rich quick"—and believe me, there are many people out there who will try to take your money to show you how

you can present yourself as an expert in ANY area you like—I think you might be in the wrong place.)

OK, so you can totally position yourself as a thought leader in customer service/innovation/money management/wellness...**whatever**. Fab. Now how do you go about building up that brand?

Here are four ways to brand yourself as a thought leader:

1. **Create Insightful Content, Not Just Sales Pages:** Maintaining a valuable and consistent blog, starting a podcast interview series, creating sassy videos or even writing industry insight white papers on a regular basis allow you to present **your point of view. It's like being the editor of your own magazine or TV show** without the pesky gatekeepers. Plus, creating all this useful content gives you something interesting to share in social media. PLUS, it provides constantly updated content on your site so you show up well in organic search. Meaning, when reporters are looking for people; to interview on your chosen topic or clients are looking for the best of the best in an area they need, your content will be fresh, timely and relevant. Thought leaders always have their finger on the pulse and if you are never putting new, rich content out into the world, no one will remember your name.
2. **Write Contributed Articles:** Approach the online and offline publications in your space and offer to write a contributed article on a specific topic. Media outlets are starving for good, free content right now and as long as you don't pitch but provide insightful content, they are happy to run expert work. Having press clips you can promote on your site—and media logos you can cite in an **"As seen in..."** section are vital for a thought leadership brand. Side benefit: If you do Tip #1, you can repurpose blog posts or other content to use as a media pitch. Time saver!
3. **Book Speaking Engagements:** I know, I know...**"Easier said than done, Maria!"** Well, we all gotta start somewhere. I started out offering to speak everywhere to everyone with no expectation of pay. While this is not something I particularly agree with on an ongoing basis (organizations making money off of events should pay the people providing the content and creating the draw for said events), you do have to build thought leadership slowly. Get people **talking. Make connections. Weigh the benefits you'll get. While I don't often do** free speaking engagements anymore, I do make exceptions if the exposure is huge or the potential for paid work is REAL and present. One free speaking engagement I did last year gave me amazing exposure AND led to someone in the audience hiring me to speak for my regular fee. Fine-tune your perspective **and presentations during these "freebie" engagements. Once you establish the** thought leadership, you will not only be able to command speaker fees, but **you'll have presentations already created that you can simply tweak and reuse.**

TIP: You **don't have to advertise that you don't charge a fee at first**. Come up with a fair fee you would like to get paid, invoice the organization for that amount but zero it out so they understand the value of what they are getting for your brilliance. Then, if they **recommend you elsewhere they can say, "Well, her fee is x but she's willing to negotiate."** And pretty soon, organizations will expect to start paying that fee and you can begin charging for your time.

Building a thought leadership brand does take time. But the more you can build up your body of work consistently and become known in that area, the more media and clients will look to you as the expert in your field.

## Be Interested to Be Interesting

Here is the magical secret to creating an irresistible brand, business or piece of art.

Ready?

Be interested in order to be interesting.

If you're not interested in selling sweaters, no one will be interested in buying them.

If you're not interested in defending people in court, they won't be interested in hiring you to represent them.

If you're not excited about your book, passionate about your products or if you don't create your art with a joyful heart, no one else will respond any differently.

**When you're not interested in what you do, no one will find your work interesting.**

As purveyor, inventor, entrepreneur or creator, you have to care the most.

**It's charming to say, "I hate self-promotion," but, really, if not you, then who?** If things are a grind for you, why should they magically transform for your audience?

I'm not saying hard work is not involved. Late nights. Panic. Stress. Fear. Sacrifice. Plain old bad days.

But you are Customer #1. And if it's not interesting to you, others will simply follow your lead.

## Is Accountability Dead?

Sometimes, it feels like our world has turned into a giant game of tag. People and organizations are constantly pointing fingers to blame mistakes, gaffes and actions on someone else. The ink barely dry on headlines, and people are shouting, "Not it!" in an effort to get the spotlight off themselves.

Consider:

- GM uncovers ignition flaws on their Cobalt years ago, but instead of fixing the problem at the time (too much money and time) or recalling the vehicles immediately (or even now, doing a full recall to ease public concern, they blame the drivers: "... the Cobalt and other recalled small cars were safe to drive as long as drivers used only a key and not a heavy key chain." ([WSJ](#))
- Retailer West Elm backorders my table by over 2 months without notifying me. When I email to complain after checking my order status, there is no apology or offer to rectify—it's simply "the manufacturer's fault."
- An overnight dog boarding facility skips my dog's dinner which I discover due to food being left over upon pick up. While they investigated the cause, the response? "We're sure he was fed but it was probably another dog's food." Which is also not a good thing. No apology, no mea culpa, no offer to make it up to us, compensate us a free stay, etc.
- An intern fails to report status of the work she's doing. When asked to correct this going forward and work on improving her communication skills, she responds with, "But it's not my fault. You never *asked* for a status update."

Is apology a dirty word? When did accountability go out of style? Whatever happened to "The situation is what it is, for whatever reason. How can we now make it right?"

When it comes to your brand, how you respond to crisis says more about you in a louder fashion than the thousand heroic acts you may do when things are going right.

**Explanation is not a substitute for accountability. Make things right to protect your brand.**

It may indeed be factual to blame someone or something else for why you've disappointed your audience, client, or customer. Traffic, lost shipments, sudden illness, a personal emergency that distracts you. All valid, all believable, all true.

**But that doesn't give you or your brand a free pass to disappoint and go back on your word.** I can't even count how many virtual assistants or interns I tried to hire who

had something interfere with doing what they said they were going to do, leaving me and my business hanging.

Responsibility is defined as: the state of being the person who caused something to happen. Accountability is defined as: the quality or state of being accountable, *especially*: an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions

**Simply put, you may not be responsible, but you need to be accountable.**

Hey, I get it. Life happens. Believe me, [I know this better than anyone](#). I was in the middle of a client project when I had a brain aneurysm. The firm under which I was subcontracted immediately sent in one of the principal partners to replace me so the client would not be left in the lurch.

I once gave an overseas client back a non-refundable deposit and lost money on the deal—after delivering all the work promised in the contract that she (allegedly) read and signed—simply because she abusively claimed it was not at all what she needed or asked for. English was her second language, so I think there may have been a major communication gap. But at the end of the day, in her mind, she did not get what she (thought she) asked for and it was not worth it to me to argue with a crazy person. So I took a loss: I still had to pay my subcontractor who did her part. I wished the client well and told her to use **the work we'd delivered if she wanted**.

You can be creative. You can find solutions. You can ask for patience as you honor your commitments. You can offer an alternative or line up a replacement. Or like a dedicated writer I know, you can go a night without sleep to deliver what you said you would if someone is counting on you.

What can you do to make things right? What can you do to turn disappointment into delight? What can you say to make the person feel heard and appreciated? It's not enough to say, "Well, this is why it happened. So deal with it." It's YOUR responsibility to turn the situation around as best you can.

**Epilogue:** After a tweet, West Elm told me to contact elevated support, the woman personally located a comparable item from a sister company, credited me back the difference and added a 15% discount on top of it all to boot. Nice. I told her my biggest frustration was the cavalier attitude conveyed in the initial email exchanges. True, I didn't get this service level until I took to Twitter to complain (that should not be the case) but in the end, she turned around my negative experience. It was not "Judith's" fault this happened. It was not even West Elm's. But they are the face of the transaction and they (finally) took care of it. Nice. Are you doing the same?

## 7 Simple and Stunning Blog Post Ideas to Keep Your Ideas Flowing

You're staring at the cursor and it's blinking at you, taunting you. You sigh.

When you were out driving earlier today, you had a ton of clever blog post ideas that just came to you with no effort. But you couldn't write them down. And now—poof—they are gone with the wind.

This happens to me all the time. I seriously wish I could record the thoughts I have right before falling asleep. I've written five novels in my head this way. But I can't remember a damn thing once I wake up. A Plan B is needed so here are seven simple and stunning blog post ideas that will help you so much when you can't think of anything to write about.

And **BONUS TIME**: Any of these can easily be turned into a free email opt-in download, a lead magnet for your next course, an eBook, a podcast, a video...you get the idea. Recycle, people.

Oh, and the numbers below are arbitrary. It's up to you to pick how many you can create—but play around with being short and sweet (*3 quick tips...*) versus providing a more exhaustive resource (*64 ways to...*). See what resonates with your audience the most.

1. **3 Crucial Tips for... (YOUR SUBJECT AREA HERE)**. ...*Building a Website*, ...*Finding Inner Peace*, ...*Choosing a Killer Date Outfit*, ...*Buying the Right Engagement Ring*. Whatever your business does, surely there are 3 basic tips that you always seem to share with prospects or customers. This worked well for me when sharing [4 Clever Ways to Make it Easy For Others to Promote You](#) and [3 Tips for Smarter Small Business Marketing](#). Don't fall into the trap (as I once did before a wise woman slapped me upside the head—with love) of assuming "everyone know this." They don't. It's why you have a job.
2. **6 Questions to Ask When... (YOUR SUBJECT AREA)**. People love to read articles that guide them when making a decision. And, heck, no one says you can't choose questions that would immediately point them to your products or services if it's a good fit—just make sure you're being unbiased, as people may feel like you're being slimy instead of helpful. So how about: ...*Choosing the Right Accounting Software*, ...*Picking the Perfect Executive Coach*, ...*Creating Your Social Media Strategy*.
3. **5 Powerful (YOUR FIELD) Lessons from (POPULAR NEWS TOPIC/CULTURAL REFERENCE)**: This one is super fun, because it allows you to be timely (and show up in what people are searching on right now) and showcase your cleverness in relating your expertise to something that culturally binds us. One of my most popular blog posts was [4 Powerful Business Lessons from James](#)



- [\*Bond and Skyfall\*](#). The other form this can take is “*What (POPULAR TOPIC) Can Teach You About (YOUR FIELD)*.” Relate key lessons or tips you always talk about to something timely and hot and give it a fun spin (if the topic allows for it) or simply analyze a current news story through the lens of your expertise, as I did in popular posts about [Lance Armstrong's](#) and [Susan G. Komen's](#) epic brand fails.
4. ***7 Lessons Learned When (YOUR FIELD OR INTEREST)***: You have wisdom to share based on your experience (See #1 above) and your audience is thirsting for it. **What can you share about mistakes you've made, unique things you've done, or clients you've worked with? What can they learn from your story?** Remember, share your lessons but ensure you make it about how it applies to the reader. I loved sharing [\*7 Lessons I Learned While Writing A Book...And What They Can Teach You\*](#) as well as, yes, the [\*7 Lessons that a Brain Injury Can Teach You About Your Brand\*](#).
  5. **Pose a question related to your subject area**: Think about the most popular questions you get asked about your business, brand or profession and turn that into a single-threaded blog post. *How Do I Write Good Sales Copy? How Do I Work with a Stylist? How Long Does a Website Take to Build? [What Is a Brand Strategy?](#)* This helps you showcase your expertise, offer great advice and even **make it easy for new people to join your tribe and not feel like they don't know** some inside joke. Remember, your audience may be at different phases of the buying cycle and are only just now getting to know you and your brand.
  6. **Interview another rockstar expert**: Are there folks related to your field from **whom your audience would loooooove to get the inside scoop? You don't** have to be the expert in everything. But you can be the go-to resource for curating that info and bringing those guests to your community. Are you a health and wellness coach? Interview a stylist to help your clients showcase their brand new health bods. Are you an Etsy store selling handmade jewelry? Interview a party planner on how to throw the perfect jewelry party for your friends. Do you sell customer management software to small businesses? Interview a branding expert to give them tips on how to build their brand online and create compelling content. These can be super easy to create. In my [\*Slice of Brilliance column\*](#), I interview experts in related fields that are of interest to my audience and send them a three-question form to fill out. You get a great blog post, your audience gets great content, and you get the added bonus of that rockstar also promoting your post!
  7. **Make one observation on your industry and present your point of view**: These are the thought leader posts, the ones that inspire, delight, provoke thought—and get shared. There must be something you love or hate about your industry that you have a view point on: your disgust with smarmy sales pitches (if you're a sales consultant), your crush on brands that give back to the community (if you run an advertising agency), your confusion over why contracts can't be written in plain English (if you're a lawyer), your deep hatred of hyperbolic software sales claims (if you run a software company). How can

you make this personal commentary interesting and relevant to your audience? Ensure there's a strong **takeaway** that they can ponder or act upon—otherwise it's just a rant. I tried to do this with my observations about [how perfection holds many people back](#) from birthing their great ideas into the world or [why you are called to create something that matters](#), rather than spew more noise into the world.

**Bottom line:** When you can't think of anything to write about, keep these prompters handy to help you bust through your writer's block.

## 3 Tips for a Sizzling Personal Brand

Just because you have a cool logo, it doesn't mean your brand is covered. Brand is much more than that, as we've heard many times. It's your core story, promise and reputation and it is communicated in three crucial ways: visually (looks) verbally (words) and experientially (actions).

When you are creating the brand of "You, Inc." it's important to articulate what you do, who you serve and why it matters in order to create the right brand.

Brand is all about making a promise and then delivering on it.

Here are three tips for building your personal brand (and guess what? These apply to company brands, too):

### *Tip #1: Be Clear and Consistent*

Clarity attracts people to a brand. But consistency makes it stick. You can wow someone in that first presentation or on your home page, but if you don't consistently deliver that same punch with every interaction, you'll be a one-trick pony. What are your core talents and how can you consistently showcase them through every touchpoint? Does your website tone scream "funky and irreverent" but then you bore people to tears with a static 60-slide PowerPoint presentation? Be very clear about which space in people's brains you want to "light up" when they hear your name and consistently deliver on that across everything that you do. It's better to laser-focus on a few core attributes to a well-defined audience, than to try to be all things to all people.

### *Tip #2: Dress the Part, Walk the Talk*

Have you ever seen a company's ads that claim impeccable customer service, but then get dropped into a hellacious voicemail maze when you call? You can say you are (insert attribute here) but if you don't back it up, these claims will quickly be ignored. If you are going to talk the talk, you must walk the walk—and that includes personal appearance. You can say you are "professional" but if you show up to a client meeting in ripped jeans and a tank top just because you are your own boss, your brand will be impacted. Same holds true if you convey a "modern, hip" brand personality and show up wearing something more suitable for an insurance company picnic. Dress to their brand expectations so they can justify the money spent with you.

### *Tip #3: Over-deliver to Create Brand Ambassadors*

Ultimately, brand is not what you say it is; it's what they say it is. The only control you have over your brand is to remain clear and consistent and walk your talk. But if you

do, something magical happens: those who have experienced you firsthand will evangelize for you. And don't be afraid to ask your community or clients to spread the word via social media or sizzling testimonials. When you deliver the goods, most people are happy to champion you so don't be afraid to ask. Personal branding is most effective when it comes from others, not just from you.

## 3 Things You Must Do For Your Brand Story to Bloom

It's all well and good for us to talk about having a strong brand story. But that's only part of the "story" (pardon the pun).

Whether you are a one-person consulting business or a 1000 employee technology player, there are three phases to brand "storyhood" that must all be addressed in order to have real market impact—from hiring the right people to attracting the right customers or clients:

**Define:** Sure, everyone who works here "knows" your quirky brand personality or strong values, right? Wrong. If your brand story is simply a wispy tale that only old-timers will understand—or worse, simply lives in the minds of the founders—you are lost before you even begin. How can you expect the market to know your story if YOU don't even know your story? What is it? Have you [defined your brand strategy](#)? Have you nailed down the most important points, stories and practices that make up your business' DNA? If you talk to different people across the organization, will you get a different answer? And don't forget the one answer that makes cringe: "Well, I don't know...it's kind of hard to explain. You just know it when you see it."

If you can't define your story, how can you expect your customers or clients to do so? You know your business best. [Define your brand position internally](#): What are we about, what makes us tick? What is our vibe? Who are we talking to? Where do we fit in the competitive landscape? Button this down for yourself or your internal team before moving on to Step 2...

**Articulate:** Now that you've hashed it all out, pulled it apart, examined it from all angles, gathered the stories, emotions and benefits that make you special, you have to [WRITE IT DOWN](#). Articulating the brand story is where most businesses fall down. It's not enough for you to know your own story if you can't give the market words to describe it. What is the mission and vision? What are your value statements? What is the tone of your copy? Which benefits will you tout over and over again so that you become known for them in the marketplace? Bring in a talented copywriter if words are not your thing because you must choose your words wisely. **Words matter**. What is the script you want others to say? Wal-Mart is about low prices. Nordstrom is about exquisite customer service. Virgin America is just wonderful, hip, cool and cheeky. **ASPCA is a voice for abused and neglected animals. Tom's Shoes gives a pair of shoes to kids in need when you buy a pair.**

**Share:** Now that you've defined who you are and articulated the story, are you just going to pat yourselves on the back and adjourn the meeting? Heck no. **It's time to share the story**—internally first. Are you sharing this story with every single functional area such as HR, Finance, Customer Support so they can apply the story to their own everyday actions? Does HR know the brand story so they can hire the right people

who will support it? Does everyone in marketing know the story so they can make smart campaign decisions? Does sales know the story so they can pitch to the right prospects about the right value? **Build your brand equity from the inside out.** Once everyone inside understands the brand story, then you can better share it with the outside world to generate leads, serve customers and differentiate from the competition.

**Define, Articulate, Share:** You must go through these three steps to make your brand bloom.

## What's Your Brand Position? 5 Moves You Can Try

What do yoga, the Kama Sutra and brand strategy have in common?

### It's all about the right positioning.

When your brand finds the right position to attract the right target customer, it's like star-crossed lovers meeting in the rain at the Eiffel Tower. It just **works**. There's **connection**. There's **magic**.

But what does "positioning" really mean? And how do you land on the right position for your brand? Positioning is not just about ensuring you speak to the right "buying drivers" of your ideal customer or client, but also about how you stack up against alternate choices.

Think about it in terms of brands you know: Does Porsche really position itself in the same category as a Volkswagen? Are they speaking to the same needs of the same target audience? Heck no. In the past, I've shared how [brand analogies are a useful way](#) of wrapping your arms around where your brand plays in the market.

Let's discuss some broad-brush options—there are nuances to all of these. One is not "better" than the other, as there are markets and customers for everything. You can still offer more than one, but what is going to be your *Lead Offer*? How do you primarily want the business to be positioned in prospects' minds?

1. **PRICE:** Price is a good choice if 1) you can achieve volume and 2) you are targeting an audience that cares about price as a buying driver. The fine jeweler **Tiffany & Co. doesn't position based on price, because that's not why people buy from them.** People buy from them because of elegance, cache, and luxury craftsmanship. Walmart, however, **positions itself based on "lowest prices" because of their target customer and their volume and reach.** Positioning based on low prices has its drawbacks: this strategy attracts the **least loyal customers because if they find a lower price elsewhere, that's where they will go. Someone can always undercut you, and it's hard to defend long term.** Plus, you may not attract the customer or clients you really want. Competing on price has a **tendency to "cheapen" your brand and perceived value.** Some people may avoid you, thinking your low price says something about the quality.
2. **QUALITY:** This positioning is not about price but about *value*. This message resonates for people who are not as price-sensitive but care about results, aesthetics, or craftsmanship. This position works if your products or services do indeed deliver the highest quality. If you tout high-quality products, they

better last. If you are a life coach competing on quality, **you're going to need** some strong testimonials and success stories to back up this claim. Price becomes a non-starter if you are leading with a quality position.

3. **EXCLUSIVITY:** This position is about scarcity and limited access, as well as cache. It works if you offer a limited amount or only take on a certain type of customer or client, which can be perceived as higher value. Again, price is not an issue—and in fact if it's too low, it could raise red flags. Some examples: A club with an expensive VIP wait list. A pricey seminar with limited spots. An event planner who only takes on four celebrity weddings a year. This strategy means you may well be targeting a very specific niche—so your actual customer base needs to reinforce this position. Many high-end designers or stylists employ this strategy. With this position, you are looking to attract **people who want to be “in the know” and appealing to their sense of jealousy or aspiration.** They are more attracted to you because it could be something **they can't have!**
4. **SERVICE:** Are you all about the customer experience? Do you respond within eight hours? Do you offer a 100% money back guarantee? Do you customize **your consulting offerings based on each client's needs? Do you offer an amazing concierge service?** How do you go above and beyond? Nordstrom combines a quality positioning with a strong customer-service component. So does Zappos. In my book, [\*Branding Basics for Small Business\*](#), I included many case studies from small businesses that combine a quality position with one of dedicated customer service. Be careful, though, when combining low price and quality service: **It's fine to offer both—Walmart doesn't necessarily want their employees to be rude to customers, right? But “best quality” and “lowest price” can often contradict each other and confuse two different buying drivers.** Again, what is your **“lead” position**—who is your target market and which one do they care about the most?
5. **PERSONALITY:** You can position based on your brand voice, look and feel. How do you talk and act—and thus, WHO you are talking to? Are you the quirky, playful, whimsical one? The trusted, conservative one? The edgy, innovative one? Again, choose wisely as the personality you position yourself around **should map to the person you're trying to attract and speak to their buying drivers.**

Offshoots of a personality-based position include *social good*: positioning your business not as the best quality, or cheapest price, or most exclusive but as the one **that benefits a good cause. Tom's Shoes positions themselves this way to appeal to a certain buyer who is driven to buy based on social responsibility.** They may not make the best quality shoes, or even talk about how much they charge. But they are leading with their social good message.

Another offshoot is *thought-leadership*: Is your business, founder or CEO a visionary or does the market look to your business as a bellwether? Think of Tony Hsieh from



Zappos talking about excellent customer service and “delivering happiness.” Steve Jobs and Apple. I once worked with an IT consultancy client. What they did was not unique but the CEO was an amazing man with an impressive military background and strong values. We combined a thought leadership and brand personality positioning strategy to make his company stand out from the competition. This may not work for you in the short term or until you achieve scale and reach, but it is something to think about.

OK, great. You know you need a positioning strategy. How do you choose?

1. First, take inventory of your strengths and attributes that are authentic to what you can *consistently* deliver. It’s not the time to pretend to be something you are not. What do you do well—or if you’re rebranding or launching, what will you do well?
2. Now, identify those attributes that are most:
  - a) Relevant: Does your target ideal customer care? Does it speak to how and why they buy?
  - b) Unique: None of your competitors are positioning this way or going after that particular buying driver. I like to call this finding the “whitespace” in the market.
  - c) Compelling: Which ones will generate buzz and align with your company’s culture and personality?

Once you land on your position, you can communicate it through all your brand messaging, customer touchpoints and even your brand look and feel. Kismet. Connection. Ease.

## Boost Your Brand: 3 Tips To Make Blogging Easier

*Blah, blah, BLOGGING.*

If you just sighed in disgust, overwhelm or sheer panic at simply reading the B-word, I'd like to talk to you today. Blogging is, in my opinion, one of the single best ways to grow your business, boost your brand and hustle up some thought leadership street cred. Think of it like you are the editor of your own little magazine: press releases and pitching be damned! You have the ultimate "in" with the editor of this publication. Because YOU are the editor.

How can blogging help your brand and business?

- It gives you a forum to promote your expertise and point of view.
- It's SEO-licious, meaning you can write about your core product or service areas and search engines will develop huge crushes on you.
- It provides your target audience with information, advice, entertainment—all great things to build community and nurture future sales and customer loyalty.
- It offers you content to share in social media, for those days when you're like, "What the heck should I tweet about?"
- It gives visitors a reason to keep coming back to your site.
- It provides the press with examples of your expertise in case they are writing a story for which you'd be PERFECT.

I could go on and on... *"But I hate writing, Mariiiiiiaaaaa!" (enter whining) "I don't have time." "What should I blog about?"* I will admit that I have it a bit easier, as I love writing—it's my favorite form of expression. But even I have days where I face a blank Word document, with a blinking cursor mocking my lack of creativity. We all do. **The muse does not always show up when it's convenient for us.** Sometimes she's out grabbing a caramel macchiato and surfing One Kings Lane for fun household furnishings.

Here are 3 tips for making blogging easier and, heck, more *fun*:

1. Jot down every question someone has ever asked you about your line of work: Seriously, the [juicy ones](#), the silly ones, the obvious ones, the annoying ones. Are you a knitting store? How about "How can I learn to knit?" "Where can I find fashionable patterns?" "Isn't this something just old women do?" Or you're a personal trainer: "What are the best super foods I should be eating?" "How can I start on Day One if I'm overweight?" "Don't I need to be wealthy to have a personal trainer?" Perhaps you're a social media consultant: "How do I start on Twitter with zero followers?" "Which platforms should I be on?" "When are the best times to post on Facebook?"—or even "What questions should I

- ask to find a good social **media consultant?**” Got your list? BOOM. You just came up with three months worth of blog posts.
2. **Riff on trendy topics:** Let’s say the **Grammy Awards** are coming up. Can you relate something about your business back to music, a Grammy winning star or even something controversial that happened at the show? New movies come out all the time. Can you relate some tips about your products or services back to a [popular film](#)? These kinds of posts are as fun to write, as they are to read—and you can take advantage of trending topics when promoting the content on social media. For example, if #Grammys are hot, hot, hot the day after the event, you can use that hashtag to promote your post.
  3. **Interview interesting people:** Whom would your target audience (or you) love to hear from? Are there related experts who complement what you do that **would be valuable for your readers? You don’t have to come up with all** the blog post ideas yourself—sometimes the best thing to do is feature [another interesting person](#) with juicy nuggets of wisdom to share. Not only will your audience love it, but you can establish a built-in promotional partner—and you **get to be generous and support someone else’s great brand so perhaps later,** they may support you.

Blogging may seem like a pain in the neck, but the rewards you reap can exponentially grow your business. Give it a try for a solid six months and see what happens. There are a lot of resources out there to help you blog better as well, such as [Copyblogger](#) and Jay Baer’s [Convince and Convert](#) blog.

## 4 Tips to Create Magnetic Brand Messaging

How can you engage and delight your audience without sounding like everyone else?

**Brand is communicated through more than just a pretty logo. It's actually** communicated in three important ways: visually, verbally, and experientially. I call this the **Three Legged Stool of Brand**.

*Visually* is what you think of when you think of brand: logos, colors, design.

But your brand is also communicated *verbally*: your copywriting, your tone, your messaging personality.

And finally, where the rubber hits the road, your brand is communicated *experientially*. **Now that you've promised me a brand visually and verbally, do you deliver?** If your brand screams hip, cool and innovative, then your products and services—even your employees—better walk the talk!

**The verbal aspect, the way your business “talks,” is one of the most important ways to communicate your brand.**

What is your brand “voice”? **How should you write your copy?** Which story should you tell? Getting your messaging right can often overcome any shortfalls in the visual presentation, as I've personally seen from successful brands that have horrible websites or logos.

**Here are four tips to help you craft magnetic messaging that engages, informs and delights your audience.** This is oh-so-important in everything from your About page to your sales copy.

### #1: Lead with Benefits

Many businesses tend to ramble on and on about what they provide. “I offer, I provide, I sell, I—I—I!” **Talk about an ego trip. It's not all about you. Customers don't care about you. They care about *themselves*.** While there is a time and a place for simply describing what you do, it's important to remember that your marketing and customer-attraction messaging needs to do more. **Talking about *what you do* is a feature or capability. Talking about *what a customer gets* is a benefit.**

For example, a car company can talk about ergonomic safety belts, side-impact air bags and the like. But the draw is that their cars keep you safe in a crash. Once you establish the benefit and hook a customer with how you make his life or work better, **you can then back it up with the “How.”** What benefits do your offerings provide, from

the customer's point of view? What do they GET? Try to focus your key benefits list on only three to five themes that you can repeat over and over so people will remember.

## #2: Back Up Your Claims

It's one thing to state benefits, but then you have to prove why you are able to make those claims. **Back up every benefit you claim with a few proof points.** Have you won awards? Is your product the only one of its kind that does something? Do you have customer testimonials or success stories? Make sure that every benefit you throw out there is defensible so you're not just all smoke and mirrors.

## #3: Ditch the Jargon

Many companies are afraid their competitors know something they don't so they end up using the exact same meaningless words just to keep up. Yes, you have to speak the language of your audience but there's no need for trite phrases that no one can understand. **And besides, how will that help you stand out?** *"Building best-of-breed solutions to maximize innovation for productive change-makers"* means absolutely nothing to your target customers. Nor does it compel them to action or get excited about your brand! **If you're going to talk or write, make your words matter.** Talk like a real person would talk as much as you possibly can so you can connect, persuade, fire up, and inspire. Make your words count and be as action-oriented as possible.

## #4 Have Calls to Action

In your marketing, be clear about what you want people to do next. Make sure you know the one action you want someone to take when you create a web page or write a brochure. If you leave them hanging, or worse, give them too many options, they will do nothing. **If they're on your webpage, what is your goal for each page?** What do you want interested people to do next? Every marketing piece should have a clear next step so browsers become buyers without working too hard.

Put one of these messaging tips into practice today. Come up with your list of three to five core benefits and your proof points for each. Or do an audit of your website and ensure each page has a clear call to action. You may even want to ask someone to read your materials and flag any confusing jargon you may have missed. Soon, **you'll have** the clearest and most compelling messaging on the block.

## Finding Your Brand Voice

A trusted colleague and successful small business owner once asked me:

### ***How do I determine my brand “voice?”***

Voice is so crucial to your brand communications. Remember the three-legged stool of brand: Visual, verbal and experiential? The “verbal” component—what you write and how you talk—is a key pillar of a strong brand. Is it cheeky or irreverent? Is it formal or conservative?

Here are three guidelines for landing on the right brand voice for your business:

**Know your strengths:** What do you bring to the market? You may want to sound like Apple, but if you don’t deliver what they do and you’re not hip, innovative and well-designed, it’s fake. Don’t copy someone else—what does *your* business bring to the table? Play off of that.

**Know your customers:** Who is your ideal customer? Flesh out that customer profile and understand what makes them tick. What is their sense of humor, what do they need to hear, what will attract them? What cultural references will they understand? What do they worry about, value or despise? Map this to your strengths and frame your offerings up in a way they want to hear.

**Know yourself:** Especially for solopreneurs, write like you talk. I know I do. You are the business and the business is you. Bring your authentic personality to the party as it’s the one thing a competitor can’t copy.

**The point at which knowledge of your strengths, your customers and yourself collide is where you can find your brand voice.**

Think of it like a Venn diagram: Where do all three circles intersect? Therein lies the magic.

**How do you know if you’ve landed on something good? If it’s fairly easy to write your copy and the words just flow—and folks respond to your voice through comments, tweets or sales, then you know you’re on the right track.**

# The Secret to Differentiating Your Brand? You.

***“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.” —Oscar Wilde***

What makes your brand, business or creative endeavor uniquely *you*?

**When we’re insecure teens, it seems easiest to just copy** someone else. At that age, originality is just too risky. Or is it?

Let me take you back to 1988. My best friend and I were inseparable. Whether it was **busting out dance moves to Whitney Houston’s latest hit, swooning over teen heartthrobs** (she: River Phoenix, Me: Kirk Cameron—before he went all oddballs) or taping our own version of *Siskel and Ebert at the Movies* (hopefully that video has been lost forever), we found comfort in our shared interests and tastes.

But the scandal that threatened to rock our friendship? We bought the exact same denim miniskirt jumper.

I admit: it was adorable when she bought it and, naively thinking it would fun, I went and bought one, too. It fit both of our lean frames to a T. But she was not pleased at all and as you can guess, the inevitable happened: we wore it to school on the same day. Now granted, our high school teemed with more than 2000 students, **but still...she didn’t speak to me for a whole day, which back then felt as long as the Civil War.**

And I realized I had messed up.

In trying to take a short-cut and simply copy her style, I failed to cultivate my own identity—and ended up coming off like a first-rate fool.

**What works for someone else may not work for you.** Either it’s not at all believable, or it just looks desperate and sad. Just think about all the Apple lookalike ads you may have seen for sub-par (and not as cool) technology. **But the inverse is also true: what works beautifully for you may be laughable for someone else to even attempt.**

You need to walk your talk and authentically deliver what you promise. How do you do that? By embracing and owning who you authentically are, whether as an individual business owner or as an entire company. **It’s *your* story.** Only you—with your perspective, experience, worldview, sensibility, taste, emotion and intelligence—can tell it the way you can tell it.

While visiting the UK, I caught a news program on an MSNBC-type network. The pundit shouting at me sounded an awful lot like American broadcaster Rachel Maddow, whom I happen to like. But it was a sad attempt to mimic her success, right down to the cadence and tone with which she spoke. It was clear she was trying to replicate someone else's success rather than create her own.

**Why do we think it's easier to copy someone else rather than break new ground? Why do we feel that our story is not as valuable just because others have told something similar? If we all thought that way, another new book would never be written, another new painting never created, another innovative clothing design ever produced.**

Can you imagine? *"Well, we all have enough shirts in the world, don't we? No need to design another one."* Please.

When working with my branding clients, our process always starts with the unique spin, strengths, perspective and benefits they offer that no one else in their field can. Most of us, save for true inventors and innovators, are not really inventing anything that has never existed before. It doesn't really matter if you offer something that thousands of other people do. *No one else can do it like **you** will do it.*

**That is how you build a breakout brand—find your unquity and let it shine.**

I mean, there's tons of branding strategists out there, right? But you're here, now, reading my words and soaking up my advice. Thanks for digging *my* unique style!

Flaunt your "uniquity" and put your unique stamp on your personal brand, blog, business, or creative project. Otherwise, why bother?



## Is Your Brand A “Bad Boy?” 3 Signs You Might Be Breaking Hearts

You know the type. They knock you off your feet and **you’re hooked**. They come on strong with all their promises of love.

And yet, the reality of dating these bad boys (or gals, for that matter) falls so short of your dreams. They are always late. They never call when they say they will. And they continue to betray your trust and hurt you—but when they do, they always apologize in some grand style that **you can’t help but falling for their charms once again**. Stuck in this cycle, you begin to wonder if maybe it’s just easier to accept this unhealthy relationship because you’re tired, it’s comfortable and you just don’t want to be alone.

But did your mama ever warn you about those bad boy *brands*?

Oh, they exist. You know they do. And based on the last few years of bad experiences with **United Airlines**, an airline I used to adore, I’ve come to realize how easy it is to wake up one day and realize you’re in bed with a bad brand...and you know you’re going to come back again.

Here are three signs you are in a relationship with a bad brand. Or worse, that your business, organization or project is doing this to your poor customers:

1. **You’re a smooth talker and sharp dresser—but you break your promises:** United makes some pretty great ads and videos touting its renewed commitment to serving their customers. Each flight, you are forced to watch smiling, happy real-life employees talk about their job as more of a calling in caring for you like a mother hen. The CEO, with his silver-fox haircut and dazzling smile reinforces how much United has improved in customer service over the years. Yes, they talk a good game, but after that screen goes dark, you are back to surly gate agents, chaotic ticket counters and a complete lack of respect or information. **It’s important to remember:**

### Good-hearted brands walk their talk.

Recently, I witnessed a ticket customer service agent refuse to help a non-English speaking passenger during a chaotic cancellation fiasco at San Francisco International. She waved him away and barked quick and incoherent orders at him that even I, a native English speaker, couldn’t understand. It bordered on racism. And another time, we had a horrendous experience with delayed flights at Orange County airport, where the agents kept making us go back and forth between gates, confused two San Francisco-bound flights, and had no clear information—and then those same gate agents had the nerve to

get snitty when people who had gone beyond the bounds of patience got anxious and frustrated. Like a bad boy, they made us feel like it was our fault. As if we had no right to be upset.

2. **You make the grand gestures—but you keep breaking hearts:** After my delayed flight fiasco, the crew and in-flight team finally apologized over and over again (*"Baby, I'm so sorry. I swear I'll never do it again!"*). We received follow up emails directing us to a special website for our feedback and also offering some sort of compensation. Yes, I took them up on their offer for 3,000 bonus miles. But if this kind of behavior were not par for the course with them, I might be more willing to talk more about how this apology was a delightful gesture. Instead, I know they are just slapping a bandage on the problems and tried to buy my loyalty and silence rather than earn it. Nice try, but too little too late.

**Make-up gestures only work when they are rarely needed, not when they are the rule.**

3. **You pretend you're listening—but you're not:** Tweet @united if you ever get a chance. I'm not sure how they run their social media, but the first time I ever did this, I got a reply that was so obviously automated, it was laughable. It didn't even address my original complaint. Fast forward to sharing my fiasco last week and...radio silence. Not even the automated garbage this time. Nothing. Nada. Zip. Do the same thing with airlines like Jet Blue or Virgin America and real people with real personalities are there to serve, responding right away to see what they can do. And they actually DO SOMETHING. Don't bother playing the social media game if you have bots replying to people's issues. How do big brands with the kind of resources that United has still not get this?

**It takes more than opening a Twitter account to say you're engaging your customers effectively in social media.**

I always had a special place in my heart for United, as they were my first airline loyalty program. When I was a consultant for a large global consulting firm right out of college, I traveled with United every single week and got to enjoy the status perks that came along with that. Plus, I live in San Francisco, which is one of their hubs. But that brand love has been eroded by their bad behavior over the last ten years to the point that I don't believe a word they say. Sure, heroic acts of kindness from individual workers over the years has helped keep me "on the hook" and that is why I just can't seem to say goodbye—plus being in a hub city, I'm often forced to fly with them.

But is that really the brand you want? One in which your customers are just "hanging on" and settling for the abuse until a better option comes along?

**Aim higher. Be the good brand. The one customers don't just want to date but the ones they marry for life.**

## Brand Building vs. Random Tactics

Some days, I feel like a salmon fighting my way upstream. No matter how many books are written, no matter how many posts [Seth Godin](#) writes, no matter how many times our own lives are touched by organizations doing it right...**people still want to think brand is the same thing as a logo or advertising.** They still ask me as a consultant or others like me, **“Just tell me what marketing programs I should do to help me get more sales.”**

In my book, [Branding Basics for Small Business](#), I define brand and give smaller organizations a tool to craft their brand strategy so that they can then figure out where their audience is, what they care about and the best ways to reach them with **the right message.** The book is not about, **“Do this and you’ll increase sales”** because I can’t possibly know that for each reader and every company is different. But, when I was working on the book, an editorial reviewer suggested I sprinkle pithy tactical tips throughout the book that **don’t apply to all businesses.** **Sponsoring a county fair might work for a small local cupcake business, let’s say, but not for a start-up tech company selling software to other businesses.** We need to get rid of the stereotype that all small businesses are local and charming. Tech start-ups, consultancies, financial planners, manufacturers of ball bearings—these can all be small businesses as well. *Small* does **not necessarily equate to “Main Street.”** It just means they have way less employees, take in way less revenue and have way less budget and resources than “enterprise” companies like Apple, Walmart, or GE.

Anyone that tells you a blanket statement such as, *“All small businesses need to do (INSERT TRENDY TACTIC) to be successful”* is just lying to you. Your business has to first figure out it’s own brand, mission, purpose, desired image and ideal audience before you can figure out which tactics to employ. Too many of you are performing “random acts of marketing” and just praying something sticks as you throw money away, or you’re taking the advice of someone who gave that same advice to six other businesses that are completely different from yours.

**Strategy before tactics. Always.**

Don’t just sponsor a booth or start a Twitter account because someone told you to, or some other company did it. First, craft your brand strategy and make sure it makes sense for your goals and your audience.

**Brand can be your guide. But you have to draw the map before you can start following any directions.**

## How to Separate “The Founder” From “The Brand”

Now that Steve Jobs is sadly no longer with us, what does that mean for the Apple brand? Many companies, especially small businesses where the founder is still active, struggle with how to parlay one person’s **personality and values into the brand of the entire company**. I’ve worked with a few clients on how to bridge this transition so that the organization can scale and grow—and live on without them.

A [past article](#) did a great job of breaking down Apple’s game plan for avoiding culture shock. These guys did not just start thinking about **this when Jobs’ passed away—they’ve been working on this since at least 2004**. The culture Jobs worked hard to create lives on without him, as expressed through its structure and processes. The company **“encourages creativity within a formal structure of product development and launches.”** This is part of their product concept and rollout process now and is baked into everything they do. According to the article, this is in sharp contrast to the **“start up free-for-all feeling of a younger company like Google.”**

The best testament to this is that roles are clearly defined—even in such a creative culture. Steve Jobs believed that defined roles and creative freedom could coexist equally, and this plays out in how the company now functions without his input. As **one source cited, “Apple is ‘an army...everyone has a role.”** So, clearly, while creativity and innovation might seem at odds with process and structure, the very process and structure put in place at Apple will help that creativity continue to flourish. Ironic, huh?

The company also worked to **“develop ways to convey the company’s culture and business lessons to new executives.”** This is what I often talk about when I talk about **“operational branding.”** It’s more than just the pretty pictures or the slick ads. It’s a value and belief system that is codified and not only used to hire the right brand stewards, but to train them as well. **If you don’t think the Human Resources department plays an important role in building the brand, you are kidding yourself.**

**Steve Jobs was a unique man. But it doesn’t have to mean that Apple falls apart without him.** By transferring his own values (innovation, sleek design, challenging the status quo) into corporate brand tenets, the company can put in place everything it needs to keep that vision alive.

**Your business can be built on your own brand personality and values, but ultimately, you need to formalize that so everything does not hinge on your *personal* reputation, but on the *company* reputation.**

A past client of mine needed to scale business development and it was not feasible for him to sell every project himself. **So we took these four steps to codify his personal brand into the company’s brand:**

1. Wrote a brand positioning statement for the company that aligned to his personal values as to why he built the company and what value he wanted to offer clients
2. Adopted his trademark tone and manner in the brand personality and copywriting voice
3. Used aspects of his background to create a unique creative brand hook that no other competitor could claim—in his case, his decorated military career and achievements.
4. Created a Values Manifesto for the company that was grounded in his personal values but phrased as guiding principles his whole team could adopt and deliver.

**What are you doing to codify and articulate your brand so that it is more than just “you” and embeds into the company culture?** If you have any plans to scale and grow your business, it’s never too early to start thinking about it and laying the foundation.

## How to Pass the Brand Torch from “The Founder” to “The Company”

This is the number one brand challenge I hear from small business owners. “But so much of my business is tied up in my own personal reputation and who I am. How do I ensure the *company* builds its own brand, independent of me, so I can expand?”

Take a tip from investment mastermind Warren Buffett, who was quoted in a *Wall Street Journal* article as saying, “*I can define the culture as long as I am here. But we want a culture that is so embedded that it doesn’t get tested when the founder of it isn’t around.*”

**A culture that is embedded.** Ah, Warren: a financial *and* branding genius.

Companies do this all the time, so it’s not as hard as you think. The company brand reflects the values and philosophy of the founders, but in a way that applies to the corporate entity. See Disney, Nordstrom, McDonald’s, Facebook, Microsoft, Nike, Wendy’s. Many of these companies end up with very strong brand stories about their founders’ passion and values and serve to further attract customers.

Here are three tips on how to inject your personal brand into the DNA of your business so that it lives on even if you are not at the helm:

1. **Depersonalize:** The most important aspects of personal brands are the values and attributes that the founder shows as a human being. Take those and make those the values and attributes of the company as a whole and how you do business. If your own reputation and image is based on honesty, integrity and **straight talk, then bake those attributes into your company’s standard** operation procedures, policies and visual identity and make sure they live somewhere that the entire company can see. Turn what you are known for into what your *company* is known for. I also call this “operationalizing your brand.” If people come to you because you are the type of gal who always returns calls the same day, then make that a company policy that any call is returned within 24 hours, no matter who received the call.
2. **Document:** You can’t measure and manage something that just exists inside people’s heads or is inherent in only your own personal actions. How is that repeatable? Once you develop your values, mission, and the brand attributes for which you want to be known, *write them down*. Revisit this brand playbook periodically: it may need to evolve as you grow. This playbook can then start to

inform all of your brand communications: visual, verbal and experiential. This is the whole premise by which I consult with my clients and why I wrote my book. You've got to **WRITE IT DOWN** if you want to standardize it.

3. **Hire Right:** Warren Buffett and others understand that brand informs culture, and culture informs how you hire and whom you hire. Do you recruit people intentionally who understand and embrace your brand? (Hint: if it is not **documented anywhere per #2 above, that's your first problem**) Or do you just hire people who have worked at well-known companies or who possess all the **technical skills you're looking for?** I recently heard a recruiter talk about how they hire by the Iceberg principle, which means that above the waterline, you look for the right **skills and resume from a candidate. But it's the skills *below the surface***—if the person embodies your brand, culture and values—that matter even more to the success and longevity of the company. She said more often than not, the problems occur because of **misalignment on these "below the water" soft skills and attitudes.**

If you have personal values and a reputation that is the number one reason people do business with your company, then you'd better make damn sure you're hiring people who reflect that same work ethic and brand. See Mr. Buffett's quote above.

**Use your brand strategy to guide cultural and hiring decisions—not just to decide upon your colors or packaging.**



## Brand Is in the Eye of the Beholder

Check out this fun little experiment in brand perception at [www.brandtags.net](http://www.brandtags.net). They flash a logo up and you type the first word, or tag, that comes to mind when you see it. From the site: "The basic idea of this site **is that a brand exists entirely in people's heads**. Therefore, a brand is whatever they say it is."

Just goes to show that while logos are merely **visual elements, it's the promise, and** experience of every interaction with the company that goes into its brand and gives that logo its meaning. However, if you have had no interaction with a new brand, you will rely on the visual cues (colors, shapes, typefaces) to get a feel for what they are all about. This is why it's so important to build a strong brand strategy first, decide what you want to communicate and THEN design a logo. Not the other way around.

Years ago, I got a phone call from someone asking about my services for her fledgling business. She asked me my initial impressions of her current logo, which she had paid **a marketing agency a lot of money to design for her. Now I normally don't like to just** give spur-of-the-moment audits until I understand the brand strategy and what the company is trying to communicate and to whom. But she had described a bit about her business before I even saw the logo, so I understood some of what her main communication points were.

The first red flag I got for her was that this agency had never once asked her who her ideal customer was before designing her logo. How can agencies get away with such **negligent behavior? How can you design something when you don't know who is** consuming it and how they need to feel about it? It kills me that agencies pull the **wool over people's eyes like that**.

I gave her my honest impressions of what the color, graphics and font communicated to me. And she was not happy with my answers. She told me how much she liked her logo, and how **maybe that was just one person's opinion. To which I agreed with** everything she said. I actually liked her logo, too, and yes, my opinion is just one. One honed by decades of experience in marketing communications, branding and understanding how to separate my personal preferences from the needs of the target **audience, but yes, one person's opinion**.

**My response to her was that my opinion didn't matter and neither did hers in the end.** I liked her logo, too, but it completely contradicted what she had told me she wanted her business to stand for—and quite frankly contradicted the more sophisticated and polished brand image of the website overall, which seemed much more aligned with what she had stated.

And that is what really matters in the end. I have no idea if maybe this logo does strike a chord and attract her target audience effectively—perhaps it does (this would take more work to figure out than just a phone call). But given what she said she *wanted* her brand to communicate versus what her logo *actually was* communicating, these were my initial first reactions to the logo. And they were not what she wanted to hear. Especially after spending what I assume to be a lot of money.

**Brand is in the eye of the beholder. And it's true: if your target audience** loves your look and feel and if it communicates to them exactly what you want it to, then you are right on target. However, everything in the logo—color, typeface, graphic style, size, position, spacing—communicates something consciously and subconsciously. When **you (or your designers) don't do this due diligence in ensuring your visual elements** communicate the exact message you want to the exact people you want, leaving room for misinterpretation, then the fault lies with you—not with the people perceiving your brand.

## What's Your "Hook"? If You Don't Know, How Will Your Customers?

Telling your brand story is sort of like a newspaper article: **it's all about the lead.** Some folks may call this the "lead offer." On what does your business hang its hat? When customers have that certain need, or desire that certain experience, is it your company that comes to mind first?

Having a lead offer doesn't mean you can't have secondary messages. I often use the example of Nordstrom and Walmart. Nordstrom leads with a customer service and quality offer; Walmart with one about lowest prices. Does this mean Walmart is rude to their customers? Heck no. It just means that when you are looking for low prices, they want you to think of them. If you are looking for a good customer service experience *first*, then maybe you should go elsewhere.

A while back, [Delta announced](#) they were going to start leading their brand story with "service" not "size." After acquiring Northwest Airlines, they became the largest player by traffic—until United merged with Continental. Delta, therefore, switched stories and focused their budget on service: new flat-bed seats, video on-demand and upgraded facilities in key markets.

United may decide to focus on size for a while in terms of the benefits it provides to customers: more routes, more convenience to get where you want to go, a larger network, etc. (Sidenote: *Big* is only a relevant claim if it benefits a customer in some way and makes their life better, offers them more access, etc. Big for "big's sake" just becomes chest-thumping.) We will have to see how the United-Continental brand story shakes out.

### What is your lead story? Your brand "hook?"

What do you lead with? Can you articulate the main offer you want to be known for? Service? Selection? Style? Convenient locations? Cutting-edge technology solutions? You can't be everything so pick the main offer or the main place where you want to "fit" inside your customers' brains and build up your brand from there.

## Brand Messaging Made Simple: Can a Six-Year-Old Understand What You Do?

*“Be Bold. Be Brief. Be Gone.”*

These words hung at the desk of a software salesperson with whom I once worked. These wise words have stuck with me all these years.

Clarity and conciseness are not necessarily hallmarks of my writing. I often play with words to find just the right way of explaining a concept—and have the habit of over-explaining things to the point of confusion. A flaw of which I am very well aware and trying to remedy.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of my book [\*Branding Basics for Small Business: How to Create an Irresistible Brand on Any Budget\*](#), Alexandra Franzen, communication specialist and author of *50 Ways to Say You’re Awesome*, dropped some wisdom bombs about effective messaging. She and I have long collaborated on clients—and on my own brand messaging. A wizard with words, she knows just how to say something in a carefully curated, yet oh-so-simple way. Where you and I may take 100 words to make our point, Alexandra can name that tune in 20—and do it with spark and sizzle.

*Here is an adapted excerpt from Branding Basics for Small Business, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, that you’ll enjoy:*

Many entrepreneurs, especially those with a purpose-driven business, get wrapped up in flowery language when describing their work. But Alexandra advises that the clearest way to express an idea is best.

**“Think about the last time you read a blog post, heard a TED Talk or listened to a story at a dinner party that really impacted you, that made you want to do something,” she asks. “Was it long, convoluted, unnecessarily detailed? Or was it simple, clear, direct and conversational?” Alexandra adds, “Writing about the work that you do—your ‘reason for being’—is a form of storytelling. And if you want to inspire people to take action, a simple story is best.”**

An exercise I play with clients is to ask them to tell me how they would describe their organization to their grandmother or their five-year-old daughter. Often, what they say is exactly what they need to communicate to adults.

**Alexandra says. “If it takes you eighty-five paragraphs to explain something, you’re probably not clear on it. Particularly in the online space, people have a shorter attention span. Customers will be skimming your site, flipping around, spending just a few seconds here and there. You need to be exceptionally simple.”**

Alexandra advises taking lessons from scientist, astronomer, and author Carl Sagan, or beloved children's TV show host Mister Rogers, or English broadcaster and naturalist David Attenborough. "These people were legendary educators who had mass appeal because of their incredible skill in distilling information so that anyone from any background could understand. This is what makes them so beloved and great.

**Distillation is not the same as dumbing down.** It's about expressing the purest essence of an idea—without any unnecessary clutter."

When crafting your messages, ditch the jargon where you can. Of course, you need to speak the language of your industry but don't overcomplicate things. The goal is to make your target audience feel competent, not to make them feel dumb. **"When crafting copy for your business," says Alexandra, "above all, your job is to make the person reading feel competent.** If they think to themselves, 'I don't understand the words on the screen in front of me, and now I feel dumb,' they'll probably click away from your website and never come back. But if they think to themselves, 'I get this, and it sounds like precisely what I need!' they'll be excited to take the next step."

Follow the lead of one of the smartest people who ever lived:

**"If you can't explain it to a six-year-old, you don't understand it yourself."**—Albert Einstein

## Closing Thoughts and Book Extras

Thank you for reading these brand-building insights and tips! Hope they prove useful to whatever creative or commercial endeavor you are pursuing.

### Did you like this book?

Please tell your friends or fans! The best way to support indie authors like me is to leave a review for this book on Amazon or on your own blog (Want an interview? Let's do it! [Please contact me and we'll make it happen](#)). Such reviews are vital to a book's success online and can help others like you find hidden gems they may never have discovered. Thank you, thank you.

### Want some free goodies?

Access book extras such as free worksheets, guides and recommended blogs and people right [here](#). Please use password JUICY (all caps) to access the page.

### Want to stay in touch?

Please sign up for *The Juice* email list for weekly insights and inspirations at [Red-Slice.com](#). No spam, all goodness. Or let's connect on [Twitter](#) or Facebook. I love Twitter. Seriously. Best way to get in touch with me!

## About The Juicy Guide Series

The Juicy Guides are delicious bite-sized digital guides for busy people seeking a successful entrepreneurial lifestyle. Whether you are launching a business, seeking to grow one to the next level, starting a non-profit, marketing your art or marinating on your next big idea, these guides are chock full of wit and wisdom you can use on your journey. They are designed as short bursts of **wisdom that can be read in one sitting, because, really...rockstars and changemakers itching to do great things in the world don't have a lot of time!** Covering everything from practical brand building tips to effective time management strategies to motivational mojo, The Juicy Guides are just the shot in the arm you need to move forward with your business, brand or big idea *right now*.

### Books by Maria Ross to Enjoy:

[\*Branding Basics for Small Business: How to Create an Irresistible Brand on Any Budget, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition\*](#) (Norlights Press)

*Rebooting My Brain: How a Freak Aneurysm Reframed My Life*  
(Red Slice Press)

*The Juicy Guide Series for Entrepreneurs and Business Owners*  
(Red Slice Press) Get details on the entire eBook series [here](#).

## About the Author, Maria Ross

Maria Ross is a brand strategist, author, and speaker who believes cash flow and creativity are not mutually exclusive. She is the chief brand strategist and creator of Red Slice, a digital elixir of stories and strategies to boost your business, brand and brain. Maria is the author of [\*Branding Basics for Small Business\*](#) and a humorous and heartfelt memoir, [\*Rebooting My Brain\*](#). She is also the author of [\*The Juicy Guide Series for Entrepreneurs\*](#).

A unique entrepreneur, Maria started her career as a management consultant with Accenture (formerly Andersen Consulting), advising Fortune 500 companies such as Walgreens and Allstate. She then spent years in marketing and advertising on both the client and agency sides where she crafted brand, marketing and communications strategies for notable players including Discovery Networks and Monster.com.

After eight years as a Silicon Valley marketing executive for tech companies such as Business Objects (now SAP) and a host of startups and fast-growth companies, she started her own consulting firm, Red Slice, in 2008. A mere six months later, however, Maria miraculously survived a ruptured brain aneurysm that almost killed her. Against the odds, she got back on her feet, relaunched her business and today successfully advises startups and small businesses, blogs weekly and speaks on both business and inspirational topics. A dynamic speaker, Maria has delighted audiences ranging from the Chamber of Commerce to BlogHer to *The New York Times*. Maria has been featured in numerous media outlets, including MSNBC, ABC News, NPR, *Entrepreneur* and Forbes.com and she writes for The Huffington Post.

**A lover of food, wine, Crossfit, football and film (she's an actress in her spare time),** Maria is also passionate about giving back to the community. Her favorite causes include helping children, women and homeless or abused animals, as well as advocating for brain injury awareness as a keynote speaker, writer and advisory board member for the Brain Injury Network of the Bay Area. Maria lives with her husband, son and precocious Black Lab mutt in the San Francisco Bay Area. Learn how to tell your irresistible story at [Red Slice](#) or spark a Twitter convo with Maria [@redslice](#) or connect on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/redslice](http://www.facebook.com/redslice).



## Acknowledgments

Big thanks to Nicole White, Janica Smith and Lisa Canfield for helping me edit and bring this book to life. To Liana Moisescu for her sparkling cover design. Huge thanks to my advance reviewers for their time, energy, and eagle eyes in catching errors—as well as their generous support of my work. Thank you to all my wonderful clients for providing constant inspiration for all my teachings and insights.

And as ever, thank you to my husband Paul, my baby boy Callum and my feisty pup Eddie for making everything I do matter.