



CRAFT SHOW SUCCESS

Chapter 3:
Creating authentic branding for your business

I ran my business Random Nicole for nearly a decade before I'd even heard the term branding. Then, a few years ago, it seemed like branding was the talk of the town in relation to creative businesses. I started attending conferences for creatives and found out that branding was a huge topic of panels and workshops as well as happy hour conversations with fellow attendees in the hotel bar. At first I just listened and tried to understand what branding was. People talked about color, fonts, business cards, product, online presence and the business owners' personal story in relation to branding. So I wondered, what is branding? The answer is that it is all of those things and more.

WHAT IS BRANDING?

Branding is the YOU of your business. It's the feeling people get when they come into contact with your business. It's the overall aesthetic of your business. It's your businesses' style, personality and the story your business is sharing with the world. Ideally your potential customer would get the essence of what your brand is communicating in a few seconds. Branding helps your ideal customer find and relate to your business in a sea of other choices.



I realize that all of this seems a little esoteric. How can you communicate the heart of your business in mere moments? Although it will require some research and planning, it's not only totally possible, but pretty simple when your business is a true expression of you.

I already mentioned that when I had my clothing line I had no idea what branding was. This was over a decade ago and there weren't nearly as many resources for creative entrepreneurs as there are now. So although I had a successful retail and wholesale business with my clothing line, I had no idea what branding was. Despite my lack of formal branding know-how, I had successfully branded my business since I had a unique point of view and made sure that everything I made and everything that had to do with my business including my business cards, promotional materials and merchandising reflected that unique point of view. Time and time again I'd have friends or customers mention to me that they'd seen someone wearing a shirt or purse that I'd made. They'd generally say something like, "I was out to dinner last night and I saw someone carrying one of your bags." "How did you know it was mine?" I'd ask. "I just did, the bag was SO Random Nicole."

Without planning or even realizing it, I had strong branding for my business because I stayed true to myself and my creativity in everything I did with regards to my business. When people saw my products or business cards or craft fair booth, they knew right away that they were Random Nicole. It evoked the Random Nicole feeling and it did it in an instant.

STAY TRUE TO YOURSELF + DON'T BE SWAYED BY TRENDS

There were times when I gave into trends and requests that didn't necessarily feed my soul or the vision of my business. Looking back, those were some of my biggest mistakes as a business owner. At one point a large department store expressed interest in my line BUT they wanted me to make a few changes to my designs and drop my prices. I was star struck by the idea of being in a huge, well-respected national store. I did what they requested but my heart wasn't in it. I shouldn't have been surprised that even though I did what they asked, they asked for more changes and they never placed the big order they'd dangled in front of me. Now I know that the changes they asked for as well as the modifications I had to make to my goods to lower my prices took away the Random Nicole-ness of my products. By then, I'd spent lots of time and money researching, designing and recreating my samples to fit their needs and I would never get any of that back. Instead of putting the good and future of my business first, I let what the store wanted dictate my product.

Even if you're not selling wholesale yet, you may get requests for custom orders. Think about what the customer is asking for and ask yourself if it's worth it to you and if what they want fits the personality of your business. If the answer is yes, then by all means make those adjustments or create the custom item. Just don't let the customer become a dictator of your businesses style.

Having said that, there are exceptions to this rule. I know dozens of independent designers who made a few small changes to their products at the request of a wholesale buyer. These small changes didn't take away from their brand and led to growth for their line and business. Unlike me, those designers analyzed what the store asked for with a critical mind and weighed it against their brand and business model. For me this lesson was a costly one, but at that moment, I vowed to follow my instincts and stay true to my brand.

If this comes naturally to you, then great! Keep doing what you're doing. However if you struggle with achieving cohesiveness with your business and products, then take some time out and focus on the branding on your business.



CREATE A BUSINESS BRANDING MOOD BOARD:

If you're in the early stages of your business you may not be able to hone in on your style and aesthetic. In that case, I suggest doing a vision/mood board on paper. I know, I know. Vision boards are so hippy dippy. But they are also a great way for creatives to tap into their artistic side and subconscious to dig deep and determine their aesthetic. Grab some magazines, poster board and a glue stick and let your mind go as you select images and collage them onto your board. If you're averse to the whole glue sticks and collage thing, consider making a secret Pinterest board. Often you'll surprise yourself by the colors, fonts and images that end up prominently featured on your board. Download the mood board worksheet and example at the end of this chapter for detailed instructions.



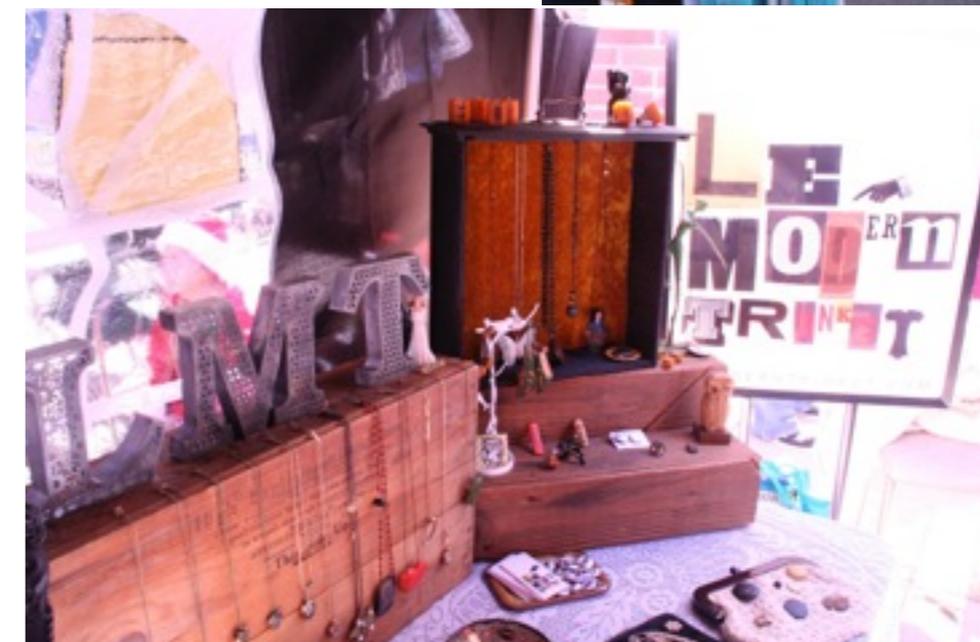
COLOR IS EVERYTHING

Color is another important aspect of branding. Likely you've heard about color research and how colors affect people's moods. Ignore the rules of color and use your instincts to pick your colors when you do your mood/vision board. Then, take those colors and analyze them in regard to the meaning of color as well as what those colors mean to you. If you're looking to attract clients with an earthy aesthetic, hot pink is probably not the best choice. This doesn't mean you can't use hot pink, but you may want to use it as an accent color amid a more neutral palette.



IT'S ALL ABOUT THE FONT

When my mom asked me to design a business card for her, she only had one request. “You have to use my favorite font.” I cringed because I knew what her favorite font was: the dreaded Bradley Hand. I’d nicknamed it “mom’s font” since it had been her go-to for emails, notes and even invoices for her housekeeping customers for over a decade. If you’re not familiar with Bradley hand, its goal is to look like felt tip pen writing on paper. It’s perfectly fine for a grocery list (although some font connoisseurs would beg to differ) but totally unacceptable as a professional font choice for your business. Why? It’s outdated and overused. Its kitschy appeal circa 1996 has been squashed over the past 19 years. You can also add Comic Sans (which by the way is my mom’s second favorite font) to this no-no list. There are fonts older than that, like Courier and Times New Roman that remain simple and classic. Choose a font for your business that is either neutral or unique enough so that when your customer sees it, they don’t have a flood of associations i.e. mom’s grocery list. Another standard font rule is to pair sans serif fonts with serif fonts. Serif fonts have little dashes at the ends of the letters (see below) and sans serif fonts don’t. If the world of fonts is totally foreign to you, I suggest taking a graphic design class online. Before you choose a font, make sure it’s approved for commercial use. An internet search will confirm this; just type in the name of the font and commercial use. At the end of this chapter you can download a sheet of some of my favorite fonts. Some break the above rule and some are not approved for non-personal use but at least you’ll get an idea of the wondrous variation of fonts to choose from.



EVERYTHING RELATED TO YOUR BUSINESS REFLECTS YOUR BRAND

Colors and fonts are only a small part of the graphic representation of your business. You also want to pay close attention to the design and composition of your marketing materials and online presence and make sure they fit with your brand. If your products are modern and minimalist then your logo, website, blog and business cards (in other words anything printed and digital related to your business) should be modern and minimalist too.

Your branding isn't just represented in your marketing materials and online presence. It's communicated in your product, your creative process and where customers find your goods. All of these things should fit your branding. If you make purses and your tagline is handmade in the USA, don't have your purses made in a factory overseas. Where you source your materials, what type of materials you use and how you make your items must also fit the overall vision for your business.

Consider all of these aspects of your business and make sure they reflect your branding:

- Your products.
- Your company name, business card, logo.
- Your printed marketing materials including postcards, labels and hangtags.
- Your digital marketing materials (especially your newsletter).
- Your online presence including your website, Etsy shop, social media pages and blog.
- Email signature.
- The stores that carry your line.
- The types of craft shows you sell at.
- Your craft show booth merchandising including all displays, props and equipment.
- Design elements: font, color, composition and shapes.
- Type of materials you use.
- Your creative and production processes.
- Your voice in your product descriptions, about page, blog posts and writing.



HIRE A BRANDING STUDIO (IF IT'S IN YOUR BUDGET)

If this all sounds like too much for you and you have a decent start-up budget for your new business or current business that you're ready to take to the next level, consider hiring a design studio that specializes in branding for creative businesses. If you can't afford to hire a design studio, reach out to the art or design departments at community colleges or universities in your area. Students need to build their portfolios and are often willing to work for a small fee, free or even trade in exchange for a client reference and bulking up their body of work. Even if you do have the budget to hire a branding specialist, it's a good idea to do the homework below so that when you go to them, you have a solid idea of what you're looking for. The branding worksheet will help you determine your distinct style and you'll create branding for your business that's a perfect fit for your vision. Branding studios will create an identity for you. An identity sheet features the colors, fonts and layouts for the branding of your business. If you're design savvy you can create your own identity sheet. The example one at the end of this chapter is pretty basic and only includes the logo, fonts, colors and business card design for the brand. Often identity sheets will include designs for packaging, websites, social media and more. If you want to see some examples of branding for businesses feel free to check out my branding, logo and business card portfolio at Show and Tell Design Studio, or head over to Pinterest and do a search for branding design.

CONSIDER YOUR IDEAL CUSTOMER

You're creating branding for your business but ultimately you're creating it to attract customers. There's no better way to find out what your customer wants than to figure out who your customer is. Creating a profile of your ideal customer will help you figure out if your branding matches their needs. Filling out the ideal customer worksheet at the end of this chapter is the perfect place to start. If you have an existing customer base, consider sending out a survey and asking your customers about themselves. I love Abby Glassenberg's blog post about how she called some of her longtime customers/blog readers on the phone. What an awesome way to find out what your clients need by connecting with them in such a personal way!



QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN FIGURING OUT YOUR BRAND IDENTITY

- Will your branding stand the test of time as well as changes in what you make?
- Is your branding unique enough that when consumers see it they will know it's yours?
- Does your branding tell the story of not only your business but your process?
- Does your branding communicate the why of your business as well as the what and how?

And the biggest question...

- Does your branding communicate the personality of your business instantly?

Don't get overwhelmed. Remember that I ran a successful business for nearly 10 years without ever hearing the word branding! Whether you're a new business or an established business, completing the worksheets at the end of this chapter will help you create or assess your brand and make it distinct, unforgettable and able to grow and sustain over years to come.

