

Positive Publishing Perspectives

Your Guide to Getting the Most Out of Your Publishing Business

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Why Build a Brand?

Branding is an important part of the marketing process. Yet independent authors often fail to understand the significance of a strong brand in the rapidly changing publishing world. Often, authors feel it is demeaning to “brand” their books, or feel that establishing a brand may limit their marketing options or audience. Some authors lament that establishing a brand stifles their individuality or creates a false impression of who they are.

In fact, a good brand is not a false creation, but a positive extension of who you are. Branding focuses on your strong qualities, helping the potential reader establish a level of trust with you as a publisher. Branding helps you focus your efforts on those marketing areas where you can be most effective, without being distracted by the latest gimmick or fad in the industry.

Let’s talk about some of the reasons why a brand is important, and how it relates to independent publishers.

Branding Creates Value

“The art of marketing is the art of BRAND BUILDING. If you are not a brand, you are a commodity. Then price is everything and the low-cost producer is the only winner.”

Philip Kotler

*Strategic Marketing for
Educational Institutions*

Think about your last grocery shopping trip. How often do you buy the store brand of a product? How often do you buy a “name

brand” item even when a store brand option is available? Why did you buy the more expensive brand over the generic product?

We are willing to pay more for a brand because strong branding conveys a sense of value. Often, the store brand of a product isn’t just similar to a name brand, IT IS THE IDENTICAL PRODUCT! Many companies create custom packaging for store chains, and often the store brand is the same product that you find in the brand name. But even when people know this, they often reach for the name brand anyway.

Without a strong brand, your book is just one of a million titles available on the market. If you don’t have a strong brand, people won’t see the value in your book and will instead look elsewhere for their reading material.

Branding Communicates Instantly

You have about six seconds to grab a customer’s attention. How much information can you really convey about your book in that time? Without a strong brand, your ability to communicate with your customer base is severely reduced.

Consistent branding allows you to effectively reinforce your message with customers. People see your name or logo and they immediately assign certain information and qualities to the product.

Think about going to the movies. You want to take the kids to see a movie tonight, but you haven’t really been paying attention to what is in theatres. You look in the newspaper and see the following family movies are showing:

The Adventures of Millie Moose
(Bree Entertainment)

To the Stars and Back (Kidtime Studios)

The Golden Dragonfly (Disney)

Knowing nothing more about the movies than the titles and the studios, which movie do you think 90% of the parents go to? Which one do YOU take your kids to? Disney has a strong brand, and parents expect a certain type of movie out of the studio. You see the name Disney tied to a product and that immediately communicates to the consumer certain feelings and information.

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Branding Builds Trust

Along with that instant communication comes a pact. A strong brand represents an agreement between the company and the consumer. Research has demonstrated time and time again that consumers are more likely to trust companies that have strong brands. And particularly in a bad economy, trust is a prized commodity for any business.

For the independent author, that trust is essential if you want readers to buy your books. Consumers have millions of choices. Why should they spend \$10-\$20 on your book? Your brand helps to earn the consumer's trust.

Think about your favorite author. Have you ever read a book by him or her that you didn't like? For most of us, the answer is yes. But we continue to read subsequent books, because we trust the author's brand.

By the same token, if you read a book by an author you never heard of or who has a weak brand, and that book is bad, how many more times will you spend money on that author? Because you have no built in trust in the author, you become less likely to buy future books.

Branding Builds Loyalty

Research has shown that in most industries, 80% of your business comes from 20% of your customers. Think about that for a moment. While you may pick up the occasional customer that buys one of your books, the majority of your actual profits will come from your loyal readers that buy books for themselves, their friends, and then proceed to tell others about it.

Strong branding creates a sense of ownership in your products. When a customer feels ownership in your books, they are more likely to buy your subsequent titles and to encourage others to do so.

Customers that are loyal to your brand want it to succeed. They often take an active interest in the success of your company.

One of the classic examples of customer loyalty in the hobby game industry would be Palladium Books. A couple of years ago, the company suffered a serious financial loss due to fraud. When the publisher's fans learned of the situation, they rallied around the company by not only buying more books but by making actual donations to help the company recoup some of its losses.

Now why would complete strangers make financial donations to a for-profit company that lost money? To the customers, protecting the brand was important, because the brand has strong personal meaning. What would have been seen as a whiny plea for charity from any other author became a battle cry to rally the troops. That is what strong branding can do for a publisher.

How To Build Your Brand

Even if you are an independent author with only one book, building your brand is important. In fact, it is vital, because you have no previous history with the consumer base.

Decide Who You Are

Your brand should be an extension of who you really are. You want your brand to convey your positive qualities. But you also need it to convey exactly what you are doing. Are you publishing chick lit, or children's books? Are you an author of crime drama, or horror novels? Your brand should immediately convey this to potential readers.

One of the places where many independent authors get tied up is that they don't want to "limit" themselves. It's like when I ask an author to tell me the genre of the book and I hear "Well, it's sort of a

horror novel but there is some romance but there is also comedy and it has some mystery elements too."

Even if all of that is true, remember the 80/20 rule. 80% of your business will come from 20% of your customers. Define your brand in terms of establishing a strong connection with that 20%. You can't be everything to everyone. Don't try. What you want to be is a strong brand to a select group, so that those customers will make you their first choice.

Be Consistent

Once you have decided on your brand, be consistent. If the brand image you have been trying to convey is one of serious literary style, you don't want to have glittery butterflies on your website. If your brand is suppose to convey lighthearted, family fun, be wary of banner exchanges or advertising on your site that is adult oriented.

Select colors and fonts that will be both easy to read and that will quickly convey your message. And then use these same colors and fonts as much as possible. Making the wrong choices, or constantly changing them, can confuse customers.

Don't think these are important issues? Let's run a little experiment. Lets assume you need to select a specialist to take care of a medical condition your child has. Your child is terrified of doctors. None of your friends have any suggestions, and your insurance company has limited your options to the following four doctors. You go online to see if you can find any more information, and you do find websites for each doctor. This is what you see:

Dr. John Doe

Dr. Elaine Williams

DR. ADAM JONES

Dr. Sam Gordon

All other things being equal as far as available information, which doctor seems to be the most kid-centric? Which doctor do you think your child will be the most comfortable with? Which doctor do you think has the best understanding of children?

The first and last choices convey seriousness and strength, which would be great qualities if looking for a doctor for yourself, but not for a scared little kid. The third choice has an almost dark and gloomy vibe to it. The second choice, however, has a light, friendly feel. For a parent looking for a doctor for a sick, scared little child, the second choice creates a sense of comfort. The doctor's brand says "I understand kids."

Be Careful What You Post

The internet is a wonderful tool, but it can also destroy your brand if you aren't careful. More than one career has been derailed by wayward internet behavior. Things like Twitter, Myspace, Facebook, and other social networking sites can be great resources, but they are also the places you are most likely to destroy your brand.

I recently had a woman ask me for some marketing help with her children's book. She had actually invested a lot of money in promotion, and even had a few book signings. Few people showed up, however, and her sales were low.

The production value of her book was phenomenal. Her company website was amazing. I couldn't see anything she was doing wrong. Then I Googled her name and came across her Myspace page.

On her page was what she thought was a funny photo of her and some of her girlfriends, obviously drunk, and partially dressed. She often talked about her sex life on her Myspace page as well. I asked her if she had noticed any increase in page views of her Myspace page since she had started advertising. "Yeah, actually," was her reply.

The conclusion was that her marketing efforts were attracting attention, and people were using the internet to learn more about her. But one of the potential reasons that interest didn't convert to sales was because she was destroying her own brand with her posts.

Once you post something on the internet, it becomes public knowledge. Even if you think only your friends and family will see it, keep in mind that anyone searching for you will come across it as well.

Act Like Your Brand Already Matters

Part of what sets your brand apart from the millions of other authors out there is how successful people think you already are. People are attracted to success. If you can make your brand seem important before you have released your first book, you increase your ability to market your book.

When we first prepared to publish our [Neiyar: Land of Heaven and the Abyss](#) campaign setting, we knew we needed to hit the ground running in order to get gamers on board. One of the things we did was create a line of Neiyar-themed products at Cafepress, and started sending out free t-shirts to gaming conventions for use as door prizes. We published short stories in

various gaming ezines using the Neiyar campaign setting. I did appearances at regional writing conferences and discussed the topic of world-building as it related to creating the setting.

By doing these things before we even released the first Neiyar product, we build up the value of the Neiyar brand. We took a setting nobody had heard of and turned it into a setting people were waiting for.

Get People Involved

It is not enough to tell people to buy your book. You need to get them committed to the idea of your brand. Giving people the chance to interact with you gives them a personal investment in you and your company.

Encourage people to sign up for a newsletter. Create a forum for people to discuss your book or just chat with each other. Keep a blog and let people know what you are working on. Invite people to participate in surveys or giveaways. Ask for feedback, and then thank them for giving it to you. The more people have positive interaction with you and your company, the stronger your brand becomes.

Once people are personally vested in your brand, they will share it with their friends and family and help you build your customer base.

Branding Checklist

Create Your Logo and Slogan: For example, when we were preparing to launch our [Karma Roleplaying System](#), we wanted to differentiate our game from the other available systems. We looked at what was currently being done in our industry, and decided to

embrace a brighter, more exotic theme. We chose a font that was both easy to read but still conveyed an exotic feel. We use the same font on all Karma products, and almost all products use the same warm color tones throughout.



The most important point is to use your logo consistently. Once you have committed to the style, you don't want to constantly change it because it will confuse customers. While we may occasionally change the background color of the logo to fit a page design, the overall concept remains the same.

Your slogan should not be so "witty" that people don't get it. Keep it simple, and tie it into how you want people to perceive the brand. For Karma, we came up with "*For every action, there are consequences.*" The slogan plays on the theme of Karma, and to the roleplaying community, implies player involvement and action.

Build a website: Avoid free services that do not allow you to have your own domain name. www.janedoepublishing.com is both easier for people to remember and has stronger branding potential than www.geocities.com/ms/janedoepublishing.com.

Make sure that your website is reader friendly. Avoid overly decorative fonts that are hard to read. Provide good contrast between your background and the text. Avoid including pop-up boxes that distract the reader.

Clean Up Your Internet Presence: Get rid of those embarrassing photos from the New Year's party that are on your buddy's Facebook

page. Start typing forum posts in complete sentences.

Avoid "Guilt by Association" by distancing yourself from things that might hurt your brand. If you are trying to establish your brand as a family-friendly publisher of Christian Young Adult books, you don't want mom finding your membership at *Hardcore Drinkers Online* or *Spouse Swappers*. If you used your real name at these places, it might be time to establish an alias so that your posts to those forums don't turn up in a general Google Search (and yes, they will!).

Of course, by the same token, if you are building a brand around a tough guy image, you might want to do the same with your membership to the *Martha Stewart Garden Club*.

Start a Blog: Use your blog as an opportunity to build up anticipation for your book. If possible, your blog should use the same color themes and fonts as your website. Post updates regarding the book's status. Build up the people that are helping you. For example, if you just hired an artist to design your book cover, make a post about the artist and include links to the artist's site. This will both make the artist feel good about working with you and encourage your blog readers to get involved.

Reach out to those you want to emulate: Try to take advantage of "Success by Association." Does your favorite author have a blog? Does your favorite magazine or company in your industry maintain a forum? Join it and get involved. Include a brand-specific signature line that is both unobtrusive but noticeable. You don't even need to plug your book. Just making thoughtful contributions to conversations will build recognition of your name and your brand.

Ask for advice from those you respect. And then thank them

publicly on your blog. It benefits the person you asked by offering him or her additional positive publicity, and it benefits you by establishing a positive connection between you and other successful people.

Encourage Involvement: Ask for feedback, and welcome it with open arms. Even if you don't intend to act on it, remember that you want to encourage people to develop a sense of ownership. And if you do someone's take advice, give credit where credit is do.

For example, if one of your readers gives a suggestion about your book cover and you make a change, you might post something like "And I really want to thank Cheryl S. for her suggestion about the color scheme. It really made a huge difference!" Not only are you making Cheryl feel good, but you are also offering a sense of ownership to everyone, because they see that you are listening and that you care.

Practical Resources

[The Importance of Brand Identity](#), Lawlor Group

[The Six Financial Benefits of Brand Identity](#), AVS Group

[Branding Strategy Insider](#)

Julie Ann Dawson has over 15 years of experience in marketing and direct sales. She has works for organizations as varied as local government, a senior center, a non-profit holistic health organization, and even vacuum sales. She founded *Bards and Sages* in 2001 as a vehicle to promote her two creative passions: speculative fiction and roleplaying games. PPP takes her real-world marketing knowledge and puts it to practical work for independent authors.