



Branding Basics

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What exactly is a brand?

If you ask the American Marketing Association, a brand is a “name, term, sign, symbol or design or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers, and to differentiate them from those of other sellers.” (That kind of run-on sentence is probably why no one asks the AMA very many questions.)

So let's break it down into simpler terms:

Brand = all the things you create and use to make your company/products stand out from everyone else's.

That means that everything – from your company name to the font you use on your packaging – works together, creating a look and feel that clearly says “YOU” to anyone who sees it. There are many companies who do branding well, and it's a good idea, before you take on branding your company and products, to look around at who's gotten it right. Being a crafter, I assume you've been to a craft store in the not-too-distant past. Did you happen see an aisle of Martha Stewart projects and tools? Next time you're at the craft store, take a look. That line is branded within an inch of its life – the packaging shape and colors, the typeface, the use of images – everything is consistent, so when you see even part of a package, it's instantly identifiable as part of the Martha Stewart line. That instant recognition is what branding is all about.

So why's branding so important?

There are three major reasons why it's a good idea to create a brand for your company, and they break down like this:

1 Simple = memorable.

Keep in mind that having a name that's easy to spell and remember means that it will be easy for someone to find you at shows, and afterward. If your etsy shop name is higgletypiggletypoppinshop.etsy.com, that's going to be tough to remember for someone who sees you for a few minutes at a craft show, then wants to buy something else from you a month later. Keeping it simple makes it finding you again an easy thing to do – without looking, could you spell the name of the etsy shop at the beginning of this paragraph? Probably not. So maybe popshop.etsy.com would be a better choice.

If you've already started your business with a name like higgletypiggletywhateveritwas, it's not the end of the world. You just need to work a little harder to make sure that your name gets out there and is remembered. For example, you'll want to have lots of business cards or hand-outs with your name on them at shows, and put your name and web address on your products and their packaging – the easier you make it for people to find you, the more people you'll bring back to make additional purchases.

2 Consistency = recognition.

If your products are packaged in a way that's quickly recognizable, and it relates directly back to your company name, logo, website, etc, you'll help your customers find all of your products, not just their favorite one. This is true if you're selling wholesale to stores (so a customer in a boutique can find all of your products easily, even if some are in a different part of the shop) or if you're selling at craft shows (that way, a customer who buys from you at a show and then later comes to your website can tell right away that he/she is in the right place).

3 Cohesive look = professionalism and credibility.

It sounds a little silly, but making sure that everything has the same look and feel can go a long way to establishing credibility, even for the newest company. Taking the time to really develop a cohesive look and feel (also called a company aesthetic or visual voice) for every aspect of your public presence – from your business card to your product tags – will inspire people to take you more seriously. Which would you trust – a guy in torn pants who tells you he's a successful financier, or a guy in a nice suit? It's the same principle. You want to be the guy in the suit. Well, maybe not literally, but you get the point.

Creating your brand – the essentials.

If you're just starting out, you'll need a name. Whether it's your own name (Jane Smith Studios) or one you've invented (Girl Metro, Inc. comes to mind), you'll want to think long and hard about what you'll call your business. Make sure you love it, because you'll be putting it on everything you do. Keep in mind that you want to make it easy to remember, and easy to spell, or you'll have extra work ahead of you in terms of keeping customers coming back.

Once you've got that name in place, start to work on the visual voice of your business – this is that cohesive look and feel mentioned earlier. The biggest component of this visual voice is your logo. Spend the time and/or the money to create a great, professional-looking* logo. Your logo will become the basis around which everything else will revolve, so be sure you love it from the very beginning! Once you've got your logo created and you're thrilled with it, put it on **everything**. Repetition is the key to memory, so you want to be sure that logo is everywhere you can possibly put it, from your business cards, to your product tags and product itself (if you can), to your etsy/trunkt/supermarket shop, to your website... and remember that it doesn't have to be huge, it just needs to be there.

*A note about professional-looking logos... that's not to say that your logo needs to look corporate – it should reflect your business and your customer base. So if your customers are mainly high school girls, your logo and visual voice should appeal directly to them, not to their grandmas. Professional-looking is also about making sure that anywhere your logo appears, it looks good – for example, you would never use a gif file of your logo for a printed piece, like your business cards, because it would look bitmappy and unprofessional (that's the guy in the torn pants all over again).

Finally, if you're struggling to create that visual voice for your company, try this. Get a piece of posterboard or paper – at least letter-sized, or larger if you like. Print out your logo, and stick it at the top of the page. Then, go to the web, magazines, newspapers, your fabric stash, whatever you've got lying around, and cut out things that remind you of how you want people to feel about your company and products – the images can be anything – type faces you like, fabric swatches that have the feel you're after, smiling people, etc... Take all the things you've cut out, and stick them on your page. Notice that there's a trend there? That's your visual voice coming out. When you've finished, hang the page in your workspace, so that whenever you're working on something for your company – whether it's choosing a font for your packing slip or creating new product tags – you can think about how it would fit on your board. If it doesn't fit in with the things on there, then you can take another look at it and think about what could change to make it fit in.

Creating a brand for yourself is a little like creating your own personal army of representatives. Each thing that marches out into the world with your name and branding will point people right back to you. And if one item goes out and says "hi, I'm X," then when you've got hundreds or thousands of little voices out there, they make a really big impact.

Read more at ChicagoCraftMafia.com. The Chicago Craft Mafia is:

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