

Want to be a Big Brand? Think Small.

By Mark Zust



The days of the mega-brands are numbered.

Sure, Starbucks still rules the world of suburban bistros. Kids still spend a year's allowance on the latest Nike high tops. Yes, there are still giant banks, law firms and sports teams roaming the earth.

Yet, on any given day, small consumer and service companies are kicking the big boys' butts. For instance, New York Knicks basketball star Stefan Marbury is coming out with a \$14.99 pair of shoes that look and perform great. To prove it, Stefan wears them during every professional game. Mom and Pop coffee shops are springing up in cities and 'burbs daily, serving up an authentic vibe and better java for less money. Even big companies like Google and Yahoo use a network of small, inexpensive Dell PC's instead of mega mainframes. Big doesn't work the way it used to. We know what happened to big oil (Enron) and their gargantuan accounting firm, Arthur Andersen. In case you hadn't noticed, big banks are spending millions of ad dollars to convince you that they're really small, friendly and accessible (yeah, right).

Why the big shift to small?

Because consumers know small is better. It's the small firm that returns your call. Small firms respond quickly to changes in the marketplace. They listen to their customers and give them what they want, fast. Small firms want your business and are willing to work for it. Most importantly, small companies are excellent at what they do or they wouldn't survive, and they can compete with big companies by being smart when it comes to using technology and third party contractors.

Small is Mighty

To all those small business owners out there who think they can't compete with the big brands, I say don't sell yourself short. The only way to grow into a big brand is to behave like a small company. In today's tech-centric world, any company or anybody can be a beloved brand. Craigslist, started by (you guessed it) a guy named Craig, is a highly profitable online classifieds service with fewer than 20 employees who just happens to be in the top ten most visited sites on the planet. Ahead of eBay. Ahead of YouTube. Way ahead of any bricks and mortar mega company you can think of, including Nike.

Marketing heretic Seth Godin, in his book *Small Is The New Big* lists more compelling reasons to think small:

- Small means you can tell the truth on your blog.
- Small means you can answer email from your customer.
- Small means you can outsource the boring stuff like manufacturing, packing, shipping and billing to others while you keep all the power to invent something that's remarkable and tell your story to people who want to hear it. Author's note: Think American Apparel, Life is Good, and the Mom and Pop shop you visit every week because they make you feel special.

Live Your Brand

How do you build your brand so that it's valued and preferred, even loved? Simple: Live your brand every day. (Notice I said simple, not easy.) The people behind small brands who provide real value to customers and love doing their job are the brands people remember and love talking about.

A quick aside: The “branding” part of your brand has to do with getting your message straight, saying it honestly, owning your promises, and getting the word out. This comes later and a talented branding firm like NBP can help you. What we're talking about right now is your brand today and what people say about it once you've left the room. You can begin polishing your brand immediately (and spend little or no money) if you pay attention to the little things:

- Everyone in your office should know and greet every customer by name.
- Throw out 90% of your sales literature and put next year's marketing budget toward customer service training for everyone, not just the sales staff.
- Listen more, sell less. Companies that can admit “our customers really don't need us” are the ones who will really listen and respond when their clients tell them what they do need.
- Celebrate little victories. Throw appreciation parties that last 15 minutes once a week. Send a thank you email to a different star employee weekly or even daily. Let everyone know when you land a new piece of business, especially when it's from a long-standing client.
- Tell your story. Not just at networking events and annual sales meetings, but every chance you get. Encourage your staff to do the same and give them an incentive to do so. Consider offering flex time, a gift card, dinner for two, or maybe even a bonus on new business generated, to be shared equally by the entire staff.

So, if you want your brand to grow, live it every day and make sure it provides value worth bragging about. By providing a firm foundation today you can be assured that the “branding” part tomorrow will be easier and a lot more effective.

Yet, you can't pick up a business book, a political memoir or the latest diet guide without reading that change is a necessary element to embrace as we navigate today's frenetic, rapidly shifting world.

If you run a business, the implication is even scarier: If you don't change, and right quick, you're dead.

To make the challenge to change even more interesting, it turns out your clients aren't crazy about change, either. They want their experience with your firm to be satisfying and reassuring, not dynamic and constantly evolving. Yet, these same clients are expecting you to provide new products, improved efficiencies (which they translate into fixed or reduced prices to them) and, of course, better service.

For more than 25 years Mark has helped companies large and small get the most from their brand investment by providing brand tune-ups, overhauls and everything in between. That's why business owners call Mark the “brand mechanic”. He is available for brand evaluation, consulting, messaging and team training. For details, visit www.zustco.com. To schedule a meeting with Mark to discuss your brand, call Zust and Company at 440-777-8373.