

Branding, Message & Voice

...Case Study ~ Ellen G.



Ellen G. came to me last year and bought a package of calls to discuss the state of her art biz.

Ellen is an illustrator who creates small scale “cute” animal and creature illustrations in watercolour and dry media for the last 3 years.

Education/Training:

- primarily self-taught - drawing and painting for most of her life
- a few weekend & one day workshops in watercolour and pen and ink techniques.
- day job as an office admin. (which is good because there's no panic about having to earn right away, no matter what - honestly, the day job is a great thing.)

Website, eCommerce

- has a website with a portfolio section, and a link to her Tumblr as a blog
- Website is branded for kids with whimsical decorative elements, cute illustrations and bright colours
- no opt-in or sign-up form

Social Media & Mailing List

- all profiles promote Ellen as a children's illustrator
- posts to Facebook and Twitter from her Tumblr
- currently does not have an eCommerce option activated.
- currently does not have a mailing list (emailing your

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- friends doesn't count)
- Facebook page - 89 likes
- Twitter - 182 follows
- Tumblr - 34 follows

Revenue Options:

- sold a few commissions
- created a small series of children's birthday cards (this is the most popular item she sells)
- showed in a couple Toronto indie art fairs - very little sales
- submitting portfolio to children's publishers as a book illustrator

Biggest Pains:

- lack of sales
- lack of traction & inability to leverage interest
- growth was very slow or nonexistent
- sometimes creating was a "chore"

Ellen had been posting new art regularly over the past 2 years and had shown at a couple of small independent art fairs in Toronto like Canzine.

Sales were very slow and although people really seemed to like the artwork and respond positively, there weren't sales and there didn't seem to be any growth.

She wasn't receiving a lot of shares, RT's or likes on social media and it was becoming pretty depressing for her. She didn't understand why she was getting such great feedback at the shows and when she posted her art - but zero follow through on the buying and referring.

After looking at her website and social media profiles, I had a pretty good idea

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of where the problem lay - but I wanted to speak with Ellen first and ask a few questions to see if she could see for herself where the blockage was occurring in her art biz.

The Branding Problem

When asked why she created illustrations for children, Ellen was hesitant and unsure of her answers. ...“because I like kids... it’s important for kids to learn about animals and the environment early... I dunno - I just like drawing cute stuff...”

Looking at Ellen’s social media, I saw an overwhelming amount of interest in animal rights and environmental protection. After her art, it was the number one topic in her feed.

When asked why she posted about the environment and animal rights, Ellen was filled with passion and fire and was confident, clear and sure of herself and her answers.

She believed in the importance of the Earth and respecting animal rights and talked at length about the volunteer clean-ups and tree plantings that she’d participated in or helped to organize.

“This is the most important issue that we have facing humanity today. Everything rests on it. There’s no arguing over abortion or gun rights if there’s no clean water to drink, no air to breathe.

We can’t f*cking eat money.”

There was a very strong Shamanist foundation that ran through Ellen’s passion for the environment. She felt that protecting the Earth and spreading awareness of it’s needs and importance were a spiritual path, a sacred work.

“I hope one day I can illustrate some Earth books for kids. That would be awesome. Pairing my two loves and passions would be amazing.”

Why wait is what I asked. Why wait?

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The biggest problem in Ellen's art biz was a problem of branding (and as a result - targeting the wrong market).

Ellen didn't care about kids (not that she didn't care... well, maybe she didn't - who's to say), but she certainly didn't care about them the way she did the environment and animal rights.

That was her "why" - that was the passion and fire and excitement in her day.

Connecting her passion for the environment with her illustrations is a win. It's a solid connection to the most meaningful work she has to offer. Pair it with her cute illustrations and it's a powerful combo of cute and meaning.

Cute doesn't necessarily mean kids.

That's what had confused Ellen for so long - the equating of the cuteness brand with ONLY kids.

Ellen's personality was a little edgy and tongue in cheek cocky when it came to humour. She'd felt restricted by targeting the children's market, but didn't see cute illustrations having much of an audience outside of that.

Pairing her uber cute chibi style with edgy humour and *marketing to adults* has opened up all kinds of possibilities for her art and brand.

"I've never felt so excited or free with my art before... there's so many things I can do and avenues to try!"

Ellen is able to combine her art and love of animals and the environment together without having to figure out how to make the message acceptable to children.

The pairing of sweet illustrations and humour actually make the environmental messages less heavy and more likely to be accepted and embraced by adults.

Results:

It's still early days since changing market direction, but Ellen has focused her

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efforts towards the environmental/wild life/animal rights field.

The following are already in the works or are plans that Ellen has to change the direction of her art biz:

- Rebrand website to be more appealing to adults - clean, neutral palette and illustrations less juvenile and more environment/wild life based.
- Post a weekly environment editorial cartoon connected to a current environmental/political news item.
- Submitting illustrations and cartoons to online and offline magazines and organizations that support animal/wild life/environmental conservation/preservation.
- Plans to put together a book of the best of the cartoons to be printed and sold at comic cons, indie book fairs.
- Looking into merchandise options for the cutest (and funniest) of her illustrations.

“It’s been weird for me - but some of the most committed environmental conservation activists are the hunters. I never thought that I would ever have anything in common with them, but they are passionate and active as a group.”

- Use illustrations in her own environmental group causes, flyers and mailings (and actually sign and include her artist info on the illoz).
- Still doing some children’s commissions - but now all with an environmental theme.
- Considering the possibility of partnering with the conservation society or one of the hunter - preservation groups to run an art show and auction to raise money for the group.

“I’m really excited now because the possibilities seem endless, and they’re all really super fun. If I’d stayed trying to market just to kids, I probably would’ve given up in a year.”