Erik Stafford: Branding for Writers & Publishers Notes

Recommended by: John S. Rhodes

Erik Stafford has an extensive advertising and design background, has won numerous awards including several AAF ADDY awards, some ARDA awards, and some other ones with equally important sounding names. He has worked with a wide range of companies around the globe as part of his job as a creative director of iSushi.

On the side he has released several digital training products and consulted on several high profile internet product launches providing his creative expertise to increase responsiveness and conversions. His work has been responsible for millions in sales.

He is going to talk about branding yourself as a writer. These are the summary notes of Erik's interview, designed to help you to get the core concepts and taking action more quickly.

Have A Plan

The biggest and most valuable piece of advice that I could give you about branding is to have a plan. Really think real hard about what your big vision is for what you want to do with your time and where you want to head with your business and what your exit strategy might look like, or what your big contract might look like if that is what you are looking for.

If you are looking for a publishing deal, what does that look like? Is there one publisher in particular that you want to work with? I would really start by thinking about exactly what your big vision is for not only where you want to be in six months or in a year or two years or five years.

When you have a plan, a clear vision of what you are after, your branding efforts work out so much better than if you only have a half-thought-out plan or no plan at all.

Build a Tribe

The second tip, from a branding standpoint, is to start to build a tribe. A tribe of people who are super interested in the same stuff that you are interested in but are interacting with you in an environment that you control. That might be your Good Reads profile. It might be that you are building a big audience there and you are hosting events there and you are doing Q&As there.

It might be your blog. It might be a Facebook group. If you are writing fiction for tweens, it might be some sort of vampire, werewolf group. But whatever it is, some sort of environment that you can start to build that is filled with people who are going to resonate with your message. That really would be my single biggest tip.

It might be that you are calling people from any number of platforms to get them to whatever your ideal platform at the end of the day is. You might be using Facebook and Twitter to pull people to your blog with your ultimate goal being to get them on an email

newsletter list. That might be your vision or you might be using social media or Instagram or whatever, to point people to your Kindle listings. In your books, your ultimate end goal is to get them from your books to a Facebook fan page or group or something like that.

Pick a platform - one that you like and are comfortable with, one that fits in with your plan - and build an audience on that platform would probably be the biggest single tip that I could give you in terms of branding.

Step Out of Your Comfort Zone

I think it is always good to step outside your comfort zone and explore the options a little bit. And it may be that you stumble upon something that you like. The most important thing is just to listen to your instincts and let that guide the conversation.

To do social media well, you have to spend a lot of time on social media. It is not a one-way conversation. It is not just you posting stuff. It is a conversation. It is called social media. You have to interact with other people. You have to find influencers and people who you want to communicate with and network with, and you have to comment on their stuff and like their stuff and sort of share their stuff and get on their radar. It is almost like being at a 24 hour a day, never-ending networking event if you are doing it right.

So if you dread the idea of being social, push your boundaries and try it out a little bit. Maybe you can get a YouTube channel happening, or if you are a visual person, maybe you can get an Instagram happening. Or if you just like writing, maybe you can just start hanging out on writing forums and writing.

Pushing yourself outside your comfort zone is super important, but what I would encourage everyone to push would be to push the level of what you are comfortable sharing. Don't be afraid to share your struggles and your concerns and your fears and your worries. Be yourself.

People find that very honest and very uplifting and endearing because a lot of times, when someone perceives you as being someone above them or ahead of them or with some status, to realize those people are real people with very similar concerns is just incredibly binding. That is how those sorts of connections are made where people see you as someone that they will just buy everything you ever do.

Choose A Platform

There are a couple things you can do that I think are really going to help you build your tribe. One of them, like I said already, is to pick a platform that you really enjoy. It is really going to make things a lot easier.

I am on Facebook a lot. I really am, and I love it. I have engineered a situation for myself where that is a part of my gig. That is what I do. I love it. The fact that I am there constantly and people can count on me for a laugh or a thought provoking comment or

something silly or something stupid, I think the consistency element of it is a big part of building tribe loyalty. If you are going to do a podcast, you need to do it every week.

If you are going to post videos on YouTube, you need to set a schedule. Unless your house is on fire, you are posting that video every Wednesday or every Friday or every Wednesday and Friday. If you are mailing your email list, you have to do it every week.

Consistency really breeds familiarity and people get really comfortable with stuff that they are familiar with. We all do that and that is the whole reason you asked the question about pushing the boundaries, right Alice? If you can get people expecting something from you on a certain month or certain day or certain time of day, they will pay real close attention and they will expect it. And they will be disappointed when they don't get it. I think consistency really helps.

Create Your Own Language

The second thing to help build your tribe is to create your own language. There are two languages that you are generally going to speak with your audience. There is sort of the industry language which is the language that everyone knows in your industry that you are operating in.

So for example, the word tweens. Everyone who is operating in sort of a publishing, writing, reading, authoring level in any sort of book related industry probably knows that word. That is an industry-wide accepted word. So that is sort of the language of the industry. By speaking that language, you are letting your audience and your potential publishers know that you have your finger on the pulse of that audience.

Then you can also create sort of a second language that is wrapped around what you do that is unique to you. I will give you an example – Lady Gaga has done a great job of this. What did she call her fans? Beasts or monsters? She is the only one that does that and her tribe identifies with her because of that.

The Grateful Dead – I am not a Grateful Dead fan, but they did an enormous job of this. They created an entire language around their culture, around their audience. Shake Down Street was sort of the area where everyone sold stuff before and after the concerts and then they had dead heads and they had like half deads which were people who only came on the weekends. There was an entire book actually written– Lessons from the Dead. It is *Market Lessons from the Grateful Dead* I think is the name of the book.

Keep in mind when creating your second language that you don't want to go so deep with it that none of your stuff makes sense. But it is all kind of part and parcel of that familiarity thing. When I was emailing my email newsletter lists really regularly, like multiple times a week, I always started with, "Hey guys, it is Erik Stafford here, and…"

And whatever I was going to say after that, I would always sign off all of my emails the same exact way, every single time. It is just that sort of familiarity. I run a Facebook group right now that I love to death. It is called Opportunity Engineering and I call

everyone in the group OEs. These are the OEs, your engineers, your OEs. There is just something very familiar about the language patterns.

Be Yourself & Be Consistent

You should always be yourself. That really is the whole trick. There is only one Alice. People are going to hate Alice or love Alice. You don't want people on the gray line going down the middle.

Look at people who are mega successful; it is the Howard Sterns and the Rush Limbaughs and the Glen Becks and the Donald Trumps. You either love them or hate them. There is not a whole lot of gray area or neutrality going down the middle with people like that. The reason it works for them is because not only are they very much being themselves, but they are also exaggerating themselves a little bit.

It is almost like when you go to the fair and someone draws a caricature of you. They always make my head 72 times too big because I already have a giant bald head. They will exaggerate the ears a little or they will exaggerate this or whatever, that is kind of what you want to do.

If you are English and you are from the U.K. and you are writing love stories set in Victorian England, I want you to have an English accent. I want to see you drinking a cup of tea because that just creates the sort of image in my mind of what I want to feel and see and hear out of that. It is just sort of elevating that persona of being ridiculously you.

Other Tips from Erik

Email vs. Social Media: I think it is a great idea to use both, email and social media. Some people really enjoy the warm fuzzy feeling of being part of a tribe or part of a social community.

I also know that it is nice to feel like you're having a one-on-one conversation when you get a valuable email. You feel it is meant for you and you can save the email to read again later.

So I think both should be used, but which is better depends on who your audience is, how you like to communicate with them, what they expect from you and what you are comfortable giving. Either way you must be consistent, be interesting, send great stuff and be engaging.

Be Active: When setting up accounts or building your website, keep in mind that no one will buy anything from an empty shelf. So you have to be active. I know that a lot of our clients will build a website and the very first thing they do is put 42 social media icons on it. If you are linking people from your website to an Instagram page that you never update that is not going to help you worth a hill of beans.

I would really encourage you. If you are concerned about your brand and you want to lock up your name on multiple social media accounts, then maybe just put one post on the ones that you don't really plan on using much that says "I am really active on Facebook. Get all of my most recent updates here." Just steer people to a channel you are actively engaging.

The 80/20 rule: So the 80/20 rule means 80% of your content should be engaging and funny and interesting and personal and informative. Only 20% of your content should lead people to places where they can buy your stuff. You can link to other people, your website, your Kindle listing and so forth in the 20%.

Other People's Pages. Instead of just posting on your page or on your wall, you want to spend about 50% of your time posting on other people's pages and walls. You really want to find and follow authors that you admire, influencers in your industry and websites and places where your potential audience is living.

When you comment at these places, you don't want to just share your links. Instead, you want to inject yourself into the conversation. Introduce yourself and tell why you have experience with the topic. Share your thoughts and so forth.

People find that sort of stuff very educational and helpful. Then if you share a link at the bottom of that post that says "we post stuff like this on our blog all the time. If it helps, click here." Or even just say "if you need more info, feel free to contact me".

When blogging: Use WordPress, a mobile ready responsive theme and add some type of analytic program. It is a lot less creepy and technical than it sounds like, but by installing analytics on your website, you are going to get a really good idea of how people are finding your site and what pages or posts they are resonating with the most.

It also will give you some really good insight into how to gear your pages for your potential audience.

Topics to avoid: Unless you are writing books about these topics, you should avoid talking about politics, guns, gay marriage and so forth. These discussions can spiral out of control really fast. They pull every loony from both sides straight out of the woodwork and you are going to lose any benefit you thought you had.

It's okay to polarize and take a position, but only if you can benefit from it. Always consider, whether people agree with you on the subject or not, does the topic really benefit your brand in some way. What is the purpose of the message? Is this helping build my brand? Is this polarizing people for the right reasons?