

NELA DUNATO



The
Human
Centered
Brand

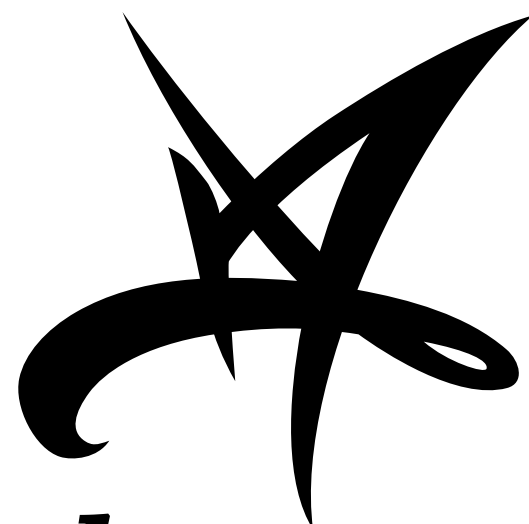
*A Practical Guide to
Being Yourself in Business*

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The Human Centered Brand

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Being Yourself in Business*

NELA DUNATO



Nela Dunato
ART & DESIGN

The Human Centered Brand by Nela Dunato

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“The Human Centered Brand is not your typical approach to branding. It’s designed specifically for heart-centered professionals and visionary souls who yearn to authentically show the world how exceptional and unique their work is.”

Jennifer Lee

Author of *The Right-Brain Business Plan*

“Nela Dunato has given us a valuable gift in this book. She unpacks why traditional approaches to branding feel too creepy to many creative and social impact oriented business owners. This book goes way beyond theory to practical strategies that I feel deeply aligned with and use similar practices with my own marketing clients.”

Paul Zelizer

Founder of *Awarepreneurs* & Business Coach for Conscious Entrepreneurs

*“This book reinforced something I’d been thinking about, but hadn’t heard anyone talk about: that the brand stems from who we are, not the client and what they want. Overall, I’d recommend *The Human Centered Brand* for Nela’s humanity, humor, realness, and heart-centeredness! Creating one’s brand is doable and Nela’s book can help you do that at your speed.”*

Beth Barany

Award-winning Novelist & Creativity Coach for Writers

“I now see branding as a complete philosophy for attracting the kind of clients I really want to work with.”

Cherry Jeffs

Artist & Creative Practice Coach

“The Human Centered Brand is a comprehensive guide to constructing a brand for your business and ensuring that it reflects your values as a business owner.”

Devon Smiley

Negotiation Consultant

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Introduction

I knew since I was a kid that I would write a book someday, but it never occurred to me that it would be on the topic of branding. I was just a passionate artist who was trying everything she could think of, in an effort to survive in a world that wasn't very nurturing towards artists. All I wanted to do was draw, paint, design, code, write, take photos and experiment with digital media to express what I was feeling and imagining. After each successful experiment, I'd share my knowledge with others in the form of tutorials and workshops. I'd be perfectly happy if that was all I did.

Sadly, being skilled and passionate about your craft is not enough to make a living. Many skilled and passionate people end up broke, and many low-skilled people find their way to fame and fortune. The business world (and the world in general) isn't fair. To expect that we'll be rewarded simply because we work hard is naïve—we know from experience that's not how the world works. But as much as I enjoy complaining about it, complaining does not help nor does it change this. So, what do we *do* about it?

In my quest to answer that question, in the past decade I've learned as much as I could about business and marketing—mainly digital marketing, which was just starting to rise in importance at the time. In addition to that, I've dedicated myself to the practice of personal growth and emotional integration, so that I could break free from the family and cultural programming that kept me from being fully present and authentic in front of other people.

By riding both of these tracks—one towards business success, the other towards self-actualization and 'enlightenment' if you will—I could see where they apparently contradicted each other, and where they worked in tandem. There were times when it appeared that pursuing one would pull me away from the other. At other times following my dream career felt like I was following my Purpose with a capital P. Within this tension, and in the intersection of business and self-discovery is where I've found the seed of what I now call the **Human Centered Brand**.

What started off as a necessity and a curiosity, grew into a passion of its own. I started enjoying the process of examining *why* people started businesses, what they wanted from them, what their process of working with clients was like, and what their clients received

from this work. I wanted to know how this related to graphic design, and what I needed to know about business owners and their clients to become a better designer, one that is focused on substance and meaning, and not only on superficial aesthetics and numeric data.

By working closely with clients over the span of several years, and by getting an intimate view into their business, I could examine how they worked, and make hypotheses about what made their brands more or less effective. As I learned from my clients, I would test my theories in my own business. If it worked, I would then use this knowledge to improve my clients' brands.

At first, it was sheer luck that most of my clients were small service based businesses. When I realized that my experience in this segment gave me an edge, I became more intentional about only working with that type of client. I realized that regardless of industry or niche, all of these businesses had something in common—something that made them very different from large corporations. These tiny businesses were still based on the vision of the individuals who founded them, and there was at least one real human with a name and a face that people knew, doing the client-facing work. This defining characteristic of small service based businesses became the basis of the approach I describe in this book.

Developing this approach wasn't as straightforward as I'd like. Both the business and the personal growth paths taught me many valuable lessons, but they were also ridden with harmful, manipulative practices that I didn't recognize at first. I got burned more times than I can count, wasting time, money and confidence. Only in recent years have prominent business people started speaking out against such predatory business and personal development practices. Before I had any good role models on how to do business and marketing with integrity, I felt like I was doing everything 'wrong' because the 'right' way, the one taught by big names in the marketing industry, felt gross.

In a typical 'rags to riches' story that authors share in their book introductions, now would be the moment when I tell you "*But luckily, you won't have to make the same mistakes I did—in this book, I will teach you my super-secret system for stellar success!*" And... No, I'm not going to do that. Why not? Simply because:

1. That's exactly the sort of manipulative tactic I'm talking about, and
2. I can't promise you that.

While I fully believe in my work, I don't think there are one-size-fits-all solutions that will work for *everyone*. In fact, the main premise behind my approach to branding is: **we're all uniquely different, and our businesses should reflect that.** I'm sharing this with the intention to help, but *you* need to decide whether something is helpful to you or not.

I won't ask you to “*suspend your judgment and just do the work and see what happens*”. Please, use your judgment and your intuition, and weigh every single piece of advice I put before you. Use this book however you see fit, and take from it only what serves you—I don't know what serves you better than you do. I'm truly passionate about the ideas I'm sharing, but it's okay if you disagree. It's okay if you question me. It's okay to skip chapters that bore you out of your mind (though I sincerely hope that won't happen). It's okay to finish half the book and come back to it in a year, when you've finally found a moment to breathe.

Ideally, I wish for this book to become your companion during the shifts and transformations that your business is bound to have, probably more than once in its lifetime. I wish for it to become a useful reference whenever you're testing a new marketing channel, or revisiting your old ones. I've poured everything I think a small service based business owner needs to know about branding into it, and I've had immense help from amazing people who gave me pointers on how to make it better. It's a labor of love, late nights, early mornings, and working weekends and I'm beyond happy, honored, and grateful that it has found its way into your hands.

Do We Need Yet Another Book on Branding?

There are many, many books on branding out there. Perhaps you've already read a few. Why did I bother to write yet another book on this topic?

As a branding professional, I want to stay on top of the industry's pulse, and keep improving my knowledge all the time. In the reading I've done for my own research, I've found that the majority of literature was created for corporations. The basic premise was that the reader is an employee in a large enterprise—an enterprise that sells *products*. This wasn't very helpful for me personally, since nearly all of my clients were either small service based businesses, independent creatives, or non-profits. (*Book Yourself Solid* by Michael Port, which echoed many of the same thoughts I came to independently, is a notable exception.)

I hang out with a vibrant community of creatives of all stripes: painters, illustrators, writers, graphic designers, developers, musicians, jewelry designers, architects, inventors... Many of my friends are in the 'helping' industries, such as therapists, coaches, and healers. Looking at all these people trying to make a living doing what they love gives me plenty of opportunity to examine how they approach their business, and to identify what works and what doesn't.

Many of these creative, sensitive folks have an aversion to the kind of marketing and branding that is common nowadays. They're put off by the glitz and glamour which is only used

to make overpriced products more desirable. I've been told by friends that they distrust anything that looks like too much money was spent on design, and assume not enough was spent on the product itself. I can't blame them—the entire advertising industry has made, and still makes, unethical and harmful decisions in the name of profit. Small, passionate business owners don't want to be associated with that.

Consumers are becoming more educated and careful as well. Decades ago, you would go downtown in search for a service provider who could mend your shoes, do your hair, or write up a contract, and had no idea how to even compare different options, except by price. Nowadays, we have many tools that help us make better decisions: online reviews, client testimonials, galleries of previous work... We follow hundreds of people on social media and get to know them as people, years before we even need their services. We can ask all of our online friends for recommendations, instead of just a couple of friends or family members. We've gotten savvier and more discerning.

With so many options at their fingertips, clients can go *anywhere*. It's more important than ever to be helpful, honest, friendly, and accessible—in short, to be human. Instead of pouring money into hit-or-miss advertising campaigns, you have an opportunity to use the natural magnetism you already possess and bring it online, so more people can get to know you. Instead of waiting for random people to stumble into your office, you can be proactive and make meaningful connections in your everyday life, so that people recommend you to everyone they know.

The approach I share in this book is an alternative to the glossy and complicated approaches that big corporations use. It doesn't require any manipulation or giving false promises. It doesn't require glamorous photo shoots, thinking up clever jokes to suck up to Millennials, complicated marketing funnels, buzzwords, or complex and expensive marketing systems.

You don't have to 'sell out' or pretend to be someone you're not in order to make money doing what you love. You can be your unapologetic, wild, quirky self and still grow a loyal audience and meet amazing clients who understand you. You only need to discover who you already are, what makes your work unique, and how to express that in your business relationships.

Instead of telling you what to do, this book offers lots and lots of questions that only you know the answers to. It encourages you to write down your own insights and *take action*. It's not just a feel-good book that tells you "*Be yourself, you're awesome*" and leaves you hanging. I wanted to take this age-old advice further, and go past the inspirational greeting card material, into deep exploratory work that gives real-world results. I wanted to write a

useful resource for all my creative friends who are struggling to attract the attention their work deserves.

The Human Centered Brand is a guide on how to be yourself in your business, so you can enjoy your work every single day, and connect with a community of people who appreciate you just as you are.

Let the big guys and unicorn startups have their way. I know we can do things *our* way, and thrive.

Before we do that, let's get some basics out of the way.

Defining the Terms 'Brand' & 'Branding'

If this is the first book you're reading on the subject of branding, it will help if we defined what these words even mean. If you ask a hundred different designers and marketers to explain what branding is, you'll get a hundred different answers. A lot of these terms are used to describe multiple concepts, which complicates things further. The following definitions explain the meaning of the words as I use them throughout this book.

A **brand** is a collection of impressions the audience has about an organization, a product or a person. A brand is intangible: it exists in the minds of other people. Every business has a brand, whether they're consciously doing something about it or not. The first chapter goes into great detail on what a brand is, how it works, and why it works. The following chapters explain how to consciously create a brand of your own using the Human Centered Brand framework.

A **brand strategy** in a greater sense is a conscious approach to creating and maintaining your brand. In a narrower sense, it signifies a document outlining the key aspects of your brand so that you, and any anyone who works in your business, can refer to it and make business decisions that are *aligned* with your brand. If you answer the questions and follow the exercises from this book and the free bonus resources, by the end of the book you'll have figured out your own brand strategy!

A **brand identity**, also called a brand identity system, or a visual identity, consists of all the graphic brand assets that are used in a specific way. This includes the logo and its variations, colors, fonts, patterns, icons, illustrations, photo treatment, etc. We'll cover these elements in detail in the seventh chapter. All of these elements and assets are documented in the **brand style guide**, which is described in chapter eight.

Branding as a verb is the process of creating and managing a brand, for example: “*We’re branding our new service*”. Branding as a noun is typically used as a synonym for brand strategy and/or brand identity, like in the sentence: “*We’ve hired an agency to do our logo design and branding*”.

A **brand strategist** is a person who helps business owners discover what makes their business unique, who their target audience is, how to communicate with them, and which aspects of their business they should highlight through the process of branding. The role of this book is to help you become your own brand strategist.

A **brand designer** is a person who designs brand identities, and provides all the graphic assets so that other people can use them. I’ve given some background on the work that brand designers do, and provided do-it-yourself brand design tips in the seventh, eighth, and ninth chapter.

Now that we’re hopefully on the same page regarding the meaning of brands and branding, let’s dive into what makes ‘small-biz’ brands different from corporate brands, and the impact branding has on the success of your business.

Whose Rules Do You Play By?

The ‘rules’ of branding are very different for small service providers and for large product-oriented corporations. Books that are written for startups may offer some insight that’s applicable across industries, but there are specifics of service-oriented businesses that these frameworks do not cover.

To understand why advice for product-based businesses and startups isn’t tailored for service providers, let’s examine how each of them creates value.

Product businesses create ready-made artifacts (physical or digital) that do not require input from individual customers in order to be designed and produced. The customer is able to choose from the available options, exchange money for the goods they want, and that’s pretty much it. Product businesses with no maintenance and low customer service needs may *never* come in touch with the majority of the people who buy from them. This is how big retail brands like Unilever, Coca-Cola, and Levi’s operate: you go into a store, buy the thing you want, consume it shortly afterward, and never look back again. Customers contact these companies only if they feel they’ve delivered a sub-par product to ask for a refund.

For **service businesses** and product businesses with high-touch customer service, it’s a completely different story. They remain in contact with the client for the entire duration

of the project, and often for months afterwards. The client-professional relationship in this type of engagement is *intense*. You spend a tremendous amount of time talking, brainstorming, debating, presenting and supporting. Every interaction has potential for things to go wrong because of miscommunication, misunderstandings, difference in expectations, unclear responsibilities or simply different standards of politeness and professionalism.

Product based businesses are focused on presenting their product in the best light. Their entire brand hinges on how this particular product compares with others in its category. With services, it's quite different. As Marty Neumeier, author of several popular books on branding, puts it (emphasis mine):

*“[...] the degree to which a customer trusts a product (or company making that product) determines whether he or she buys that product or a competitor's product. The same principle is true if a company sells services—**but in a service company, it's the people—not the product—who must earn the customer's trust.**”¹*

A brand that's focused on your services alone is not nearly as helpful as a brand that helps to present *you* as a professional.

As a service provider, you also need much thicker filters than a product based business. A product based business can afford to take on anyone with a pulse as a customer, since their interaction is minimal. For service based businesses, it's just as important to advertise what type of client your service is *not* intended for, as it is to attract those who would benefit from it.

Poor-Fit Clients Cost You More than You Think

Poor fit clients are like dead weight for your business. They demand a disproportionately large amount of energy for the value that they're giving back to you. They drag your process out of proportion, and you end up working more hours than you budgeted for, eating up the cost. At the same time, you're unavailable for the great clients who glide through your process, and enable you to profit from your work.

Poor fit clients won't enjoy the experience of working with you, so they won't recommend you to other people. (If they do, the folks they recommend you to will probably be a poor fit as well—we hang out with people who are similar to us.) Great clients will enjoy their experience so much, that they'll refer people at every chance they get, and come back over

¹ *“Branding By Business Type”* by Marty Neumeier (October 3, 2016).

and over again. Poor fit clients pick apart and strip down your services based on their badly planned budget. Great clients want to have the best, and trust your professional recommendation. **Constantly taking on people who are a poor fit will *destroy* your business.**

Designer and entrepreneur Sean McCabe paints a sobering picture about noticing red flags, and proceeding to work with a client anyway:

“One red flag immediately disqualifies a potential client—don’t justify red flags. Don’t try and fix them so you can work with this person. Red flags are like roaches. For every one you see, there are 50 you don’t.”¹

After a few years of working with clients, you learn what types of people you play with well, and you’re able to recognize them more easily. From the first email interaction, it’s clear as day whether this person is your ideal client, a client from Hell, or anything in between. However, you don’t even have to wait to interact with people to filter out those you don’t want to work with—you can do that even before you ever hear from them, using a strong, polarizing brand. This is exactly what this book is about.

Branding: The Bridge to Overcome the Trust Gap

Try to imagine yourself in the shoes of your potential client. The client needs just the kind of service you offer, and since they don’t personally know anyone who can help them with that, they’re researching online. They’ve identified five people who advertise such a service on their website in the first ten minutes alone, and one of those websites is yours. How will they decide which one is the right business for them? How will they be sure that they’ve made the right decision?

When examining websites, clients are typically looking for **trust indicators**. They have many questions on their mind, such as:

- Is this a legitimate business?
- Who works there?
- Can they really do what they claim?

¹ *“The One Rule You Must Remember to Get High-Value Clients Who Pay You More to Work Less”* by Sean McCabe and Ben Toalson, Seanwes podcast (April 6, 2016).

- Is this a realistic price for this service?
- Can I get a better deal elsewhere?
- Who can vouch for them?
- Who are their previous clients?
- But can they help *me*? I'm a special case.
- How can I reach them if I want to ask a question before buying anything?

There are explicit trust indicators in the form of information you offer on your website: company registration information, licenses and certifications, employee and office photos, references list, portfolio, testimonials, case studies... There are also subtle trust indicators that create a certain experience or mood in your client: a user-friendly website, quality photos, professional design, and engaging copy with no spelling errors... Before you've had the chance to exchange a single sentence with a prospect, your brand is communicating both on the conscious and the subconscious level.

Your marketing materials can elicit trust and excitement, or skepticism and frustration. When you're the only one providing a certain service in your local area and everyone knows who you are, it's easy. When there's several people in a given community who do the same thing, and none of them stand out in a meaningful way, everyone loses—you, your competitors, and your clients.

Today, having a strong brand is a must, because the market is supersaturated. Those of us whose businesses are location independent compete with peers from all over the world. This means that in order to charge the prices we need to charge in order to survive, we must demonstrate to our clients why our prices are *worth it*. We can't be hiding our uniqueness and blending in. Weak brands don't cut it anymore.

Having a weak brand has real-world impact on your business. It's not just about not having a polished website, or fancy brochures. **The biggest problem with having weak brand is that your business attracts all kinds of weirdos:** clients that don't pay on time, try to drive down your rates, disappear for months and come back with an urgency, call you on the weekend and expect you to cater to their every whim, treat you badly, or who think they know how to do your job better than you.

Working with clients like these leads to dissatisfaction, to you doubting your career choices, prompting you to consider leaving everything behind in order to start a sheep farm, or to drown your disappointment in a glass. If you want to work with the best clients in the

world—and there are some pretty wonderful people out there, believe me—you need to develop trust with them. Thankfully, this is easier than you think.

The Small Fish Advantage

The main reason you don't have to play by the same rules as the big brands, is that you have a huge advantage over them.

Let me tell you a story about a freelance web designer turned author called Paul Jarvis.¹ Paul was a marketing agency employee for the first few years of his career. After becoming fed up with how the agency and the projects were run, he decided to leave. When the clients found out, they started calling him and saying *“Let us know when you find a new job, because we want to keep working with you.”* After several clients did the same thing, Paul realized he didn't need another job—he could serve these clients directly as a freelancer. That was the start of his long, successful freelancing career.²

Who would you say had a stronger brand—Paul, or the agency he used to work for? Paul, of course. This story illustrates perfectly the advantage you have: **Clients don't connect with companies—they form relationships with people.**

The relationships Paul formed with clients were stronger than their sense of loyalty toward the company he used to work for. They were ready to follow him wherever he went. They were personally invested in the relationship, and were unwilling to risk working with someone else who yet had to prove themselves to them. Trust is not easily formed, and once we find someone we can trust, we want to stick to them for as long as we possibly can.

Corporations face a huge challenge: they often don't have personal contact with their customers, and even when they do, it's usually a negative experience, i.e. a customer is complaining about something that went wrong. When a customer calls support, a different person will answer each time, and they'll have to repeat their story all over again as the rep goes through a checklist that has nothing to do with their issue. They're painfully aware that there's no real relationship between themselves and the person answering the phone. They may hear that infamous sentence *“I'm sorry sir/ma'am, I'm just doing my job.”*

Contrast this with an experience you have with your hairdresser, or your favorite stall at the local market. Every time you come in, you exchange pleasantries and pick up where

¹ <http://pjrvs.com/>

² This story was shared by Paul in an interview on the \$100k Freelancing Podcast episode [*“Make Freelancing Serve Your Own Dreams with Paul Jarvis”*](#)

you left off last time. They may even know that you have school-aged kids and ask you how they're doing, or they offer a treat to your dog. If they had to close their shop, you would be seriously bummed. Such events disrupt our routine and we have to go looking for someone else who is deserving of our trust, and create a new relationship all over again. This new person never saw your kids, and doesn't have any doggie treats on hand. It's just not the same.

Being small is an advantage, because you can do 'unscalable' things. You could send each and every one of your clients a snail mail greeting card for the holidays or their birthday. You can email them just because, and check in on how their business or their family is doing. You can invite them to your office, or meet at a local café. These are the things that CEOs of large corporations might do for their 'big fish' clients, but not for the regular Joe or Jane like you and me.

Some of the larger service based companies, such as creative agencies and law firms, have already gotten the memo. They've become aware that their clients highly value passion, personality, and social responsibility, and that professional excellence goes without saying.¹ These companies have started including larger employee photos on their corporate websites, using first names in their communication, and incorporating founder's signatures in their logos. They don't want to be perceived as big and untouchable anymore—they want to create this authentic personal connection, because it works.

You're not in the same league with huge product-based companies—and that's *good*. You don't have the pressure of having to make millions of people like you. Branding for services is more simple and straightforward, and you don't need all the super complicated branding and marketing tools that corporations use.

In this book, we'll go over the branding framework that involves only the elements that service based businesses need, and not a single thing you don't need. In each of the chapters, I'll examine one of those branding elements in more detail, and provide guidance on how to define them for your business, and create your own unique brand strategy.

In the last three chapters, you'll learn different ways to apply the branding strategy you've developed in your everyday communication, on your website, at live events, and as well as how your brand interacts with your business offers, pricing, company culture, social impact, and fashion style. Branding affects everything about your business, and with this book you'll learn how to make the best of it.

¹ *"Shearman & Sterling Spent Three Years Rebranding Itself"* by Stephanie Russell-Kraft, Bloomberg Law (February 1, 2018).

How to Put This Information into Practice

The book itself covers theory behind the Human Centered Brands with examples of how other small businesses have implemented it. It also provides questions you can answer for yourself to start discovering the unique characteristics of your own brand. To make this even easier for you, I've created a companion **workbook** that follows the lessons in the chapters and takes the inquiry practice even deeper.

The Human Centered Brand Workbook is completely free, and you can download it here: humancenteredbrand.com/bonus

I recommend that you download it immediately and either print it, or keep it on your phone so that you can take notes right after you finish reading each chapter. In addition to the workbook, I've included a few other checklists, workbooks, and templates to help with implementation.

Whether you choose to read the book in one go and then complete the workbook, or follow along by answering the questions in each chapter, it's all good—but to get the most out of it, I advise that you complete the chapters *in order*, because the advanced lessons lean on the previous ones.

I tried to cover as much ground as I possibly could in this book that a small business owner would need on their journey, but unfortunately I couldn't cover *everything*. Wherever I wasn't able to go into more detailed explanations, I offer recommendations for additional resources like books, websites, and courses created by other people. Some of these resources I've used myself and loved, and others came highly recommended by my friends and colleagues. I'm not getting any financial compensation for including any of these resources. If one thing is true in business, it's that the learning never stops.

In the next chapter, I'll explain the basics of my Human Centered Brand framework, and why the order of the lessons is significant.



chapter I

The Human Centered Brands

Human Centered Branding is about identifying your unique strengths and quirks, and relying on them to create the feeling of **distinction** (“*I’m not like those other people*”) and **belonging** (“*If you like what I’m saying and doing, we’ll get along great*”).

Human Centered Brands are rooted in the core values and the essence of their founders. As these businesses grow to employ more people, they attract employees who also share these core values, and whose personalities are aligned with the way the brand communicates. This way, instead of being diluted as the company grows, the brand is strengthened by additional perspectives that new team members bring to the whole. The Human Centered Brand framework can be applied to a freelancer, an agency, a small business, an artist, or a non-profit organization.

Human Centered Branding is distinct from corporate branding and personal branding, and fills the void that these two leave behind. Human Centered Branding is **relationship-focused**. Its main imperative is to help you have successful and harmonious interactions with your clients.

I believe that business is not only about commerce—it also has a deep human component to it. **Services change people**, both the provider and the recipient. Each project we do for a client helps us learn more about ourselves, and enables us to grow as professionals, as well as people. After working with us, our clients are able to achieve the things they weren’t able to achieve before, and gain confidence as they see themselves in new light.

This is not the way most of us think about business. We’re focused on tools, methodologies, artifacts we create, and numeric results. We use these tools, methodologies, artifacts, and results to lure new clients and justify our rates. We like to “keep things professional” because letting bits of our personality show would be bad for business, or so we’ve been trained to believe.

I’m just as guilty of this as the next person: what I’m about to share with you did not come naturally to me. It took me years of trial and error to realize why I was unhappy with the agency jobs I’ve had, even though I was supposedly doing what I love, and why my own business took its sweet time to elevate from the ground to the level where I can breathe freely and find some time and headspace to write a book. Every mistake I mention in this

book is something I've committed as well, so I say this without a hint of judgment. The struggles with clients that I've mentioned in the introduction are real world examples from my personal experience, or stories people told me. Trying to operate from a purely corporate level, while you're deep in the trenches of working with clients every day doesn't work. Here's what does.

The Human Centered Brand approach relies on the natural human magnetism that each of us possesses. By magnetism, I don't necessarily mean attraction: depending on their poles, magnets can attract each other, or repel each other. This is what powerful brands do as well: they act as a strong attractor for the 'right' people, and a strong repellent for the 'wrong' people.

This natural magnetism is already working in your favor in your personal relationships, but the Human Centered Brand framework can help you bring that into your professional relationships. Instead of hiding and shying away from the things that make us unique and potentially 'weird' to the general public, we embrace this uniqueness and weirdness and use it as a leverage. This enables us to attract the attention of the people who love what we do.

Your unique combination of skills, interests and personality traits becomes a point of resonance with people who appreciate those aspects.

While I believe all brands could benefit from showing more humanity, small service based businesses have some advantages, because your business processes are working in your favor:

1. High-touch services provide plenty of opportunity to create meaningful connections that go beyond mere transactions.
2. Face-to-face or video meetings enable you to project your personality more vividly than through email and chat alone.
3. You have room to experiment on a small scale and see how your clients respond, before making any changes public.
4. You don't need as many clients as big businesses, so you can be brave and know that you'll be okay even if some people don't like what you do.

Human Centered Brands know that if a client hires a competitor, it was because they were not our right person to begin with. There is no feeling of scarcity or envy, because we don't *want* clients who are better suited for someone else. We want to work with people who are perfect for *us*. This is a healthier approach that encourages collaboration and mutual support between peers, as opposed to cut-throat competition.

When you know that people can't steal your secret sauce because your secret sauce comes from the combination of personality traits and life experiences that are unique to you, you feel more willing to teach your methods and be more generous with your knowledge. Instead of making this framework exclusive for my clients and creating a mystique about it, I'm offering it for a cheap price of a book for *anyone* to use in their business, including fellow brand strategists and designers. I'm not intimidated by competition, because I know that the clients who need *me* will find me.

Your goal is not to fight for market share with your competitors—it's to connect with a small, but engaged community that brings an equal amount of value to you as you bring to them, and not only in the financial sense.

Before we go into the details of the Human Centered Brand framework, I want to speak to the resistance that a lot of small business owners have to the concept of branding. It's a loaded word with a rich history, and your current perception of it may be miles away from what I've described above. I want to honor that, and help you process this new perspective and get accustomed to it before we roll up our sleeves to do the work.

Deconstructing Branding

Perhaps you fall into the camp of people who have picked up this book *despite* its title, not because of it. Maybe you're annoyed with the word 'brand', and think branding is for cattle, not for people. I don't blame you at all—many of my friends are entrepreneurs in healing, therapy, yoga, and similar fields. I identify as a sensitive tree-hugger as well. 'Sensitive types' can often feel apprehensive towards marketing and branding. It sounds expensive, complicated, and useless—like something that the 1% invented to keep us competitive and distracted.

I agree in a way. Many of the rules we're taught about business are not necessary. Many tactics that are popular today are manipulative and short-sighted. It's too easy to throw out the baby with the bathwater, when a lot of conventional business wisdom seems like a steaming pile of crap. I'm on your side. The 'systems' and 'frameworks' I describe in this book are not about it *having* to be a certain way. I won't think you're a loser if you do it differently.

I'm not a fan of having to follow a certain process, either. I often get distracted by random bursts of inspiration (like artists tend to do), and recognize it as a strength. I like to let things evolve organically, serendipitously, and unexpectedly. My best work comes from experimentation and doing something other than what I *should* be doing. And yet, I have a

tendency to craft neat visualizations, systematize things, and optimize processes—create clarity and structure where there was once confusion and chaos. Visually organizing information makes it easier for me to understand, memorize, and apply.

I'm aware that real life is messy, and can't be boiled down to a simple process. It's just *easier* for me to digest information in this way. I get that not everyone will respond well to this approach. So, before we get into my nerdy, neatly ordered system, I want to preface it with a complementary view on branding that is more fluid and chaotic.

THE HISTORY OF CONVENTIONAL BRANDING

Branding is the process of marking cattle with a heated metal stamp called 'brand'. No wonder we don't like this expression—it's loaded with a history of animal cruelty, and we don't want that kind of energy anywhere near our shiny, purpose-driven business. This old school brand represented **ownership**: "*These cows are mine.*" Again, the idea of living creatures being owned by other living creatures is not very humane, and certainly not a model to mimic.

However, this is not the origin of the word itself. The Proto-Germanic word *brandaz*, from which all the other language variants originated, means 'a burning'.¹ The Old English word *brand* included the meanings: fire, flame, piece of burning wood, torch, and destruction by fire. It was only centuries later that the process of cattle branding, and the subsequent word association, developed.

Later, around the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, producers of goods wanted to mark their creations (such as furniture, ale and wine) to prove their origin.² This was seen as a mark of quality, one which guaranteed to the buyers they were getting the real deal. In the 1820s in the United States it became possible to register a **trademark**—the name and the graphic that represent a company or a product—so that counterfeit items would become illegal. Companies also started using **slogans** that spoke to the value of the product in the most concise manner possible.

Branding became more complex as the marketplace and the media developed. Companies spreading into distant parts of the world needed to develop robust systems that could be reproduced by different people, no matter where they are. This has led to choosing specific language, imagery, colors, and type treatment that would remain consistent and recognizable. Large restaurant and store chains designed custom uniforms, and even manuals on how their employees must behave and talk to the customers. The goal of this very ex-

1 Source: *Etymology Online*

2 "*A Brief History of Branding*" by Matt Shadel, Convoy (January 08, 2014).

pensive and time consuming effort was to make sure that every single point of purchase radiates the same qualities that increases their buyers' trust.

Multinational companies have entire teams dedicated to managing their corporate brands, because this isn't something any single person can do on their own. This complex process with thousands of tiny cogs in the machinery is what most people associate with the word "branding" today.

Unfortunately, we do not yet have a different word that encompasses only the positive aspects of branding that are applicable to small businesses, without any of the historical, negative connotations. Some people have attempted to create their own word combinations to describe the concept of a 'brand', but it hasn't caught on outside some very narrow communities.

The way I'm using the words brand and branding in this book is tailored for small businesses, and it can get as simple or as complex as you want it to be. I'll offer a different perspective that may help you see beyond these mainstream and historical ideas, and understand how this type of branding applies to you and your business.

Why Does Branding Matter?

Back in the day when people lived in small villages, we only had a need for one bakery, one cobbler, one metal smith shop, one tailor, one barber, one midwife, one tavern, and one priest for the entire population of the village. Sometimes we didn't even have all the facilities in our village, so people travelled to nearby towns to buy and sell goods. When you needed your shoes mended and you couldn't do it yourself, there wasn't much choice: you went to the only cobbler that was *there*.

Industrialization changed everything. Suddenly we had the ability to produce more physical goods than was realistically needed. There were tens and hundreds of thousands of people living in a single city who moved there for the work opportunities in factories. We could travel farther with our gas-guzzling vehicles, so we weren't limited to what our small town could provide.

Now there wasn't only one shoe shop in town, there were *dozens*. Since proximity was no longer the governing principle to base our buying decisions on, other factors became more and more important, such as:

- Quality of craftsmanship
- Price

- Reliability
- Aesthetics
- Exclusivity
- Convenience

Instead of one regular, undifferentiated shoe shop, you had the poor people's shoe shop (cheap!), the rich people's shoe shop (exclusive! fashionable!), the military and work boots shoe shop (durable! reliable!), etc.

You had to distinguish yourself as a business in some way from other people who offered the same products or services in order to attract enough buyers. If everyone does the same thing the same way, then people will buy the cheapest option, right? But we know from experience that people don't always *want* the cheapest option. Sometimes we're prepared to pay more, because the business addresses a specific need we have that others don't.

Nowadays, the competition is tougher than ever before. Through the technological magic that is the Internet, we're able to order stuff from literally across the globe without leaving our house. Every single one of us, no matter what our profession, has thousands or potentially millions of competitors.

THE ONLY COBBLER IN TOWN EFFECT

When you're the only service provider in a local community, all the people who need this service come to you, because there's no alternative. We experience this effect with every new industry. In 2005 when I first started freelancing as a web designer, finding clients was easy. I never once had to apply for a job or pitch to anyone. Somehow word got out that I was making websites (my own website and blog had something to do with it), and I started making money.

I wasn't a super awesome designer at the time. I was okay—but that was enough, because the marketplace looked very different from today:

1. Web design was a new profession, and there wasn't a lot of competition.
2. There were no freelance marketplaces like oDesk, Toptal or Fiverr, so most of us found clients locally.

People starting out now have a more difficult time than I did breaking into the industry. Back then, I didn't need a brand. I had no idea what a brand was: I thought it had something to do with logos, color palettes, and typography. I wasn't strategic. I was just fool-

ing around in my free time after classes, and somehow it made me money. I'm still pretty amazed when I think about it.

If you happen to be one of the first people in a completely new, never seen before industry, you won't need to bend over backwards to prove how you're different and better. The fact that you're doing something original and unique is enough.

This happened with social media marketers. And life coaching. And group business coaching programs. And the first people who sold online courses. And the guy who crowdfunded a potato salad.¹ People who are the first at something don't need to work hard to differentiate—their **newness** is their difference.

Sometimes people throw money at you just for the kicks (like the potato salad guy). It's refreshing and ridiculous, and we want to take part in a historical moment. Never before in the history of mankind have thousands of people from across the world put their resources together in an effort to make a potato salad.

Originality sells. Finding a unique angle that no one else has pursued before, sells. For some industries, it's a challenge to find a new angle. Some of us have hundreds or thousands of competitors just in our city. That's where the need for a concept such as branding comes in.

Differentiation: The Main Purpose of Branding

When looking at our own industry from the inside, we clearly see the differences between this professional and that one, between our work and the work of other people. Since we're spending so much time immersed in our creative work, the subtle details jump out at us immediately. In a minute, we can see a colleague's website and analyze what they're doing great, and what's not so great.

Our clients can't do that. They haven't spent decades learning about our profession. They often miss the subtleties and take the presented information at face value, in order to save time. We can't expect our clients to be able to see our industry the way we see it. We simply need to accept that they have an *outsider's perspective*. If we want them to pay attention to what we believe is important, and notice the slight differences between us and other professionals, we need to spell it out for them in big, bold letters.

¹ In 2014, Zach Brown launched a [*Kickstarter campaign for a potato salad*](#) that reached a goal of \$55,492 USD, and garnered a lot of media attention.

We communicate how we're different from our peers, and why this should matter to our clients, through our branding. It's not enough to just say you're different—you should be able to demonstrate or prove it (for example through photos, videos, and client testimonials). If it's not completely obvious why the client should care, then you need to explain the *benefits* of your unique approach.

The Second Purpose of Branding: Connecting with the People You Most Care to Help

Human Centered Branding helps clients find the best professional to hire: one that understands their needs, communicates in a way that they like, and offers the level of quality they expect. It's not about manipulating people into buying from you if that's not in their best interest. It's not about being competitive, and tarnishing the reputation of your peers. Branding will help your clients make the best decision *for them*, which is also the best decision *for you*—because, as we've established in the introduction, clients who aren't the right fit do your business more harm than good.

The effort to create a brand may seem contrived and dishonest to you at the moment. It may feel like you're building an image designed to portray you in the light that the largest possible number of people will appreciate. Corporate and startup branding can sometimes be that way, because they're putting the product at the center, but that's not how we do branding here.

Maintaining a constructed, synthetic brand gets exhausting if communicating with people is a big part of your business model. What I mean by communicating can be literally talking to people—writing emails, consulting over phone, attending meetings, writing reports—but also creating other forms of communication such as stories, visual art, videography, commissioned crafts, theatre plays, performances etc.

For a micro-business owner, artificially manufactured brands are not sustainable. If you're forced to put on a mask every day, after a while you might start hating your business, resenting the people you work with and feeling like you want to quit. The purpose of the approach to branding I subscribe to is to avoid that, and to *enjoy your career as much as possible*. Because if it's not fun, why bother? There are easier ways to make money than running your own business.

Great Branding Creates Resonance

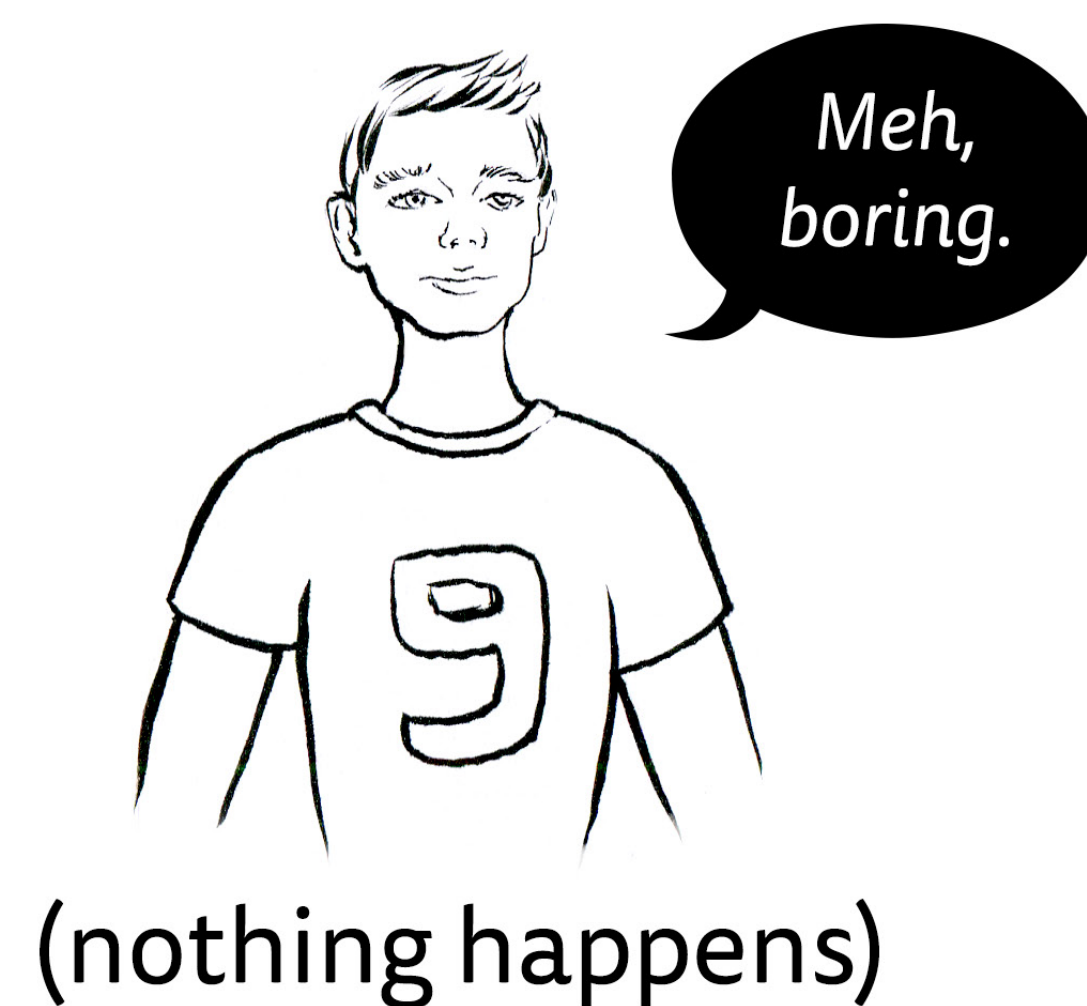
Resonance is a phenomenon in physics where object A can cause object B to oscillate with a greater amplitude (or intensity), if it hits object B's *natural frequency*. I think this is a great metaphor for what happens emotionally in people when they encounter other people and businesses whose essence mirrors their core values and worldview. Resonance comes from a match of the *broadcasted* frequency in person A and *natural* frequency in person B.

Here's a little graphic to illustrate this:

You



Not your ideal client



You



Your ideal client



Here's the interesting part: in Human Centered Branding, the 'frequency' you're broadcasting at is also *your* natural frequency. Essentially, finding the clients you want to work with is a search for people whose natural frequency matches yours. (In this book, frequency is used a metaphor for the person's mental and emotional state. If you subscribe to the

“everything is energy” worldview, you can also understand it literally, as a person’s energy field vibrating in a certain pattern.)

HUMAN CENTERED BRANDING CREATES CONDITIONS FOR RESONANCE

Imagine for a moment that every single person in the world has a string of tiny bells inside of them. Each bell has a different tone, and each person has a different combination of bells. (Hint: these bells represent the **personal core values**, which we’ll discuss in the third chapter.) There are literally millions of different combinations available, so no two people have the exact same set of bells.

Some people share a few of the tones with you. You go through the world, dangling these bells like you’re Santa’s reindeer. When you come close to someone whose bell matches one of the bells you have, theirs starts vibrating in response. Now you’re making music together, which gets louder, and attracts even more people who share that tone to join you.

Creating your work and publishing it, appearing on the stage, and talking to the people you meet at events are all you ringing your bells. Listening to other people’s stories, watching other people talk, and following other people’s creative work is being quiet in anticipation for their bells to ring. Somewhere in that process, *resonance happens*.

You can’t force resonance. It’s not like you know precisely what the specific person’s frequency is, and then go crafting your message to strike at that frequency. That’s not how it works. Each time you’re in a conversation with someone, you’d have to pretend in order to adapt to their expectations. This is not about adapting, pretending, or hiding behind a mask—it’s about **being clear, unapologetic, and natural**.

Human Centered Branding is about Self-Knowledge

Really, branding is simply a dance between self-knowledge and knowledge of the other. The knowledge of the other serves to better know yourself through the contrast. You learn where the boundary of your identity is. *“This is me. That is not me.”*

Once you’re aware of your identity, it’s time to claim your place in the world—for proclaiming:

*“This is who I am,
this is what I care about,*

*this is what I do,
and this is who I help.”*

Branding and marketing principles for service based businesses are actually the same principles we use in making friendships and romantic relationships. You make sure to look presentable, which at a minimum means showering regularly and wearing a clean shirt. You go out to places where like-minded people hang out. You introduce yourself. You conduct entertaining and meaningful conversations. You gather impressions on whether the person shares your values and seems like someone you'd like to spend time with. When you feel the time is right and the other party is receptive, you make the ask: would you like to have dinner some time?

In a business context, we make up all sorts of rules to follow. This is how you do marketing. This is how you do networking. This is what a sales conversation is supposed to look like. When really, *“Just be a decent human being”* is the thing that matters the most.

The corporate types can have their SWOT analysis, their business model canvases, their KPIs, their 9-block models or whatever. You can use it if it helps you to find new ideas and feel safer, grounded, and more prepared—but you don't *have to*.

Showing up in a business context the same way you show up in a friendship or romance context is plenty. The reason people aren't generally doing that (apart from not knowing it's even an option) is that they aren't conscious enough in their personal relationships to apply the same to professional relationships. It's hard to reproduce something if you don't know how it works.

The Human Centered Brand framework guides you through a series of questions that encourage you to think and learn more about who you are, what you care about, and who you most want to help. You don't *need* this framework. You could go on a weekend hiking trip and think while surrounded by fresh mountain air and a gorgeous view, and still come up with the same realizations on your own. But when was the last time you chose to dedicate time to thinking about such subjects? If anything, this book is a reminder that these are the questions worth asking, whether you choose to do it at home, at a retreat, or with a group of friends.

If you already know how to *resonate*, and are successfully reaching the people you want to help, you're doing just fine. That's all there is to branding. My tools are just a path that can get you there faster.

Do We Need to Be Strategic about It?

Strategy is a term used in wars and competitive games. Again, it's not something we necessarily like to associate with our business, so upon launching our own creative business, we tend to throw it out and do things on the fly. Instead of making elaborate yearly and quarterly action plans, we do what we feel like doing at the moment, or what other people expect us to do.

Maybe you've made an honest effort in the past to create detailed plans, but the fact that things didn't turn out the way you planned demotivated you, so now you may think there is no point in planning. That's what happened to me many times, and I no longer even use the word 'plan' to describe what I'd wish to do in the future—instead, I use the word 'intention'. This subtle change in wording transformed my approach to planning, i.e. setting intentions, and removed all the feelings of guilt that came up when things don't go according to plan, because we're just humans who suck at predicting our future.

If a plan is a railroad track, an intention is a beacon. It's always glowing in sight, but the path toward it can be fluid and flexible. We're often forced to respond quickly to opportunities and challenges, and our weekly plans get scrambled by Monday, noon. Instead, setting an intention is like saying: *"This is what I'd wish to have happened by the end of the year, but I'm aware that I don't have all the information yet, and I'm open to better possibilities."*

The point of all this is to say that even if you're not the planning sort of person, it's helpful to know in which direction you're headed if you want to get anywhere specific. I assume that you do wish to get *somewhere*. You probably have a vivid vision of some big project you'd like to accomplish in the future. Maybe this project seems impossible at this time, because you still don't have all the resources you'd need to make it happen. What you can do now is lay the groundwork and slowly work toward it, and gather the resources you need.

Branding strategy can work in a similar fashion. If you've anything like me, you could be changing your mood a dozen times a day, or an hour. Maybe you carry a whole lot of emotional baggage from years past, and it has no place in your business. There are moments when you're vulnerable and cranky and say things you don't mean, and later regret. We aren't always able to uphold our most grounded, centered, loving presence. While displaying some flaws is perfect and natural (yay for being human!), making decisions based on a temporary crisis can set you back.

One of the tenets I try to live by is: **if I feel bad, I don't make any decisions**. If I'm able to get some time for myself, I apply self-help techniques until I feel better (I'll mention a few later in this chapter). If outside obligations make this impossible, I keep on truckin' down the path that past me (who was in good spirits) has charted.

The point of strategy is to have a path laid out for you so you don't need to overthink it when you're having a less-than-stellar day. If the word strategy bothers you because of its war-generals or old-school-businessmen-in-suits or Silicon-Valley connotations, just use a different word.

Large companies spend months or years working on their brand strategy documents. These are very helpful for large organizations, because it makes it easy to share among employees and stakeholders, to make sure everyone is on board and understands the goals they're working towards. As a very small business owner, you probably don't need that. In this book, we'll focus only on the parts that you do need, and they can fit on a single page.

Here's another metaphor on strategy that might help bring this point more to the ground.

THE COMPASS ALWAYS POINTS TO THE NORTH

The compass doesn't care what people think. It doesn't care which direction you want to go. It doesn't depend on data or popular opinion. It just states the fact: "*Earth's magnetic North is that way.*" Your inner compass, rooted in your core values (which we will explore in detail in the next chapter), always points in the direction toward fulfillment.

People call this compass intuition, inspiration, Spirit, inner wisdom, or purpose. Whatever you want to call it, it's there for you at all times. It will show you the way if you would just stop shaking the damn thing and become still and quiet. Your inner compass is always, always available to you.

The problem is, when things in our lives or in the world are going badly, it's difficult to achieve stillness and feel the compass. That's why we make maps, and write down intentions and action plans. When we're in a good mood and good health, our vision extends farther—like being at the top of a mountain, and seeing clearly where all the meandering roads lead, and where the obstacles like boulders and canyons are. We can chart a route we think will take us to our goal the fastest. Once we get down to the valley, or get lost in a thick forest or a swamp, it's hard to see past the nearest turn. The mapped route and our travel plan is the only thing we can rely on.

Theoretically, if you could get calm, quiet, present, and centered at any moment, you would never need any plans. You'd just check in with your inner compass and know: "*This is the next step.*" Strategies, maps, and action plans are just tools for when we feel lost and want to keep going instead of getting stuck. Sometimes these tools save you from wasting your time and second-guessing yourself.

You don't *need* a strategy. It's just good to have something written down for when you feel like nothing makes sense, and you need a reminder that *you know what you're doing*. Sometimes, just the reassurance that it will all be okay is enough to kick us into gear.

You don't have to use the words I use, unless you happen to like them. There are other terms that kind of mean the same thing, and other authors may be using something different. Throughout the remainder of this book, whenever I use the word you don't particularly like because it holds the 'icky' energy for you, replace it with a word of your choice. If you own a printed copy, feel free to scribble your corrections all over it! If it makes you more receptive to these ideas and opens up new creative possibilities, I'll be more than happy.

Why Human Centered Branding Works

There are many benefits of designing a brand that's based on personal values and unique characteristics of the business owner and their employees. I'm going to list some key ones, though the list is not exhaustive, and I keep finding new benefits as I get deeper into this work.

1. BEING 'ON BRAND' IS EASY

If you've ever had to work in a place like McDonald's, Starbucks, H&M or a similar large chain, you know that they expect you to wear a certain type of clothing or a uniform and behave in a certain way, all the way to using pre-written scripts. Working in a place like that is exhausting, not only because it's physically demanding, but because you're forced to wear a mask of the brand you're working for, which may not be aligned with your personality. Acting is a respectable job that people get paid for. Yet here, low wage employees need to act *while* tending to their regular job duties.

Forming a brand around your values and your unique gifts allows you to live by it 24/7, not just put it on during your business hours. Talking to clients, writing marketing copy and content, speaking on the stage and updating your social media channels requires less effort and overthinking—the right words and actions come to you naturally.

Even large brands can benefit from more authenticity. In the classic book *Designing Brand Identity*, Alina Wheeler states:

“Organizations who know who they are, and what they stand for, start the identity process from a position of strength. They create brands that are sustainable and genuine.”

Brand expression must be appropriate to the organization's unique mission, history, culture, values and personality.”¹

If you no longer want to wear a mask in front of your audience and clients, the Human Centered Brand approach will help you find ease, and enable you to relax into your own essence more.

2. YOUR BRAND ATTRACTS THE BEST PEOPLE TO YOUR BUSINESS

When your brand is broadcasting your personal values, and how you're different from your competitors, it will attract the type of audience that shares those values and appreciates your individuality. Your client relationships will become deeper and more harmonious. Talented people who look up to your brand will inquire about job opportunities, and leave behind even well-paid corporate jobs to be around colleagues they get along with better.

People who *belong* in your community will get your 'Bat-Signal' and come towards it. You won't need to sell hard, because it will be obvious from your website, social media and other marketing materials what you're all about.

3. YOUR BUSINESS BECOMES EASY TO RECOMMEND

Some ideas are forgettable, while others are memorable. Researchers have found that people have brain structures that help them decide whether an idea is interesting and useful for others, and hypothesize that this is because communication of ideas is one of humans' evolutionary advantages.²

What this means for your business is: people are constantly on the lookout for things to recommend and talk about with their friends. If you make it relevant, your business could become the subject of their conversation. In the upcoming chapters, I'll share some techniques that will help you establish relevance for your target audience, and find what's unique about your business, so that it attracts people's interest.

4. YOUR BRAND DRIVES A HEALTHY COMPANY CULTURE

When your values are clearly defined, finding the right people for the job will be easier than ever. When we're stuck in a workplace where other people don't share our values, and don't appreciate our unique gifts, our job feels unfulfilling. We feel like we don't belong in our team, and that the other team members will never accept us for who we are.

¹ *“Designing Brand Identity”* by Alina Wheeler, Wiley (2013).

² *“How the brain creates the ‘buzz’ that helps ideas spread”* by Stuart Wolpert, Science Daily (5 July 2013).

When you're starting your own business, you need to draw a line in the sand and say: "*This is what we stand for.*" This is something we would never compromise on. This is what all our employees and clients need to get on board with, or else we cannot collaborate. There are lots of people with the skills you need who could fit in that job description, but few of them could fit in your *team*.

5. YOUR BRAND FORCES YOU TO ADOPT HIGHER ETHICAL STANDARDS

When you create a brand rooted in your values, you'll often find that manipulative and pushy business tactics are *incompatible* with it. It will become obvious how certain language and actions can harm your brand because they may sour the relationship you've built with your audience.

Your personality reflects on your brand, and your brand reflects on your personality. You cannot use "*it's just business*" as a shield anymore—you're directly responsible for every action your business does. If your business does something unethical, it means *you're* doing something unethical, and there's no weaseling your way out of it.

Reviewing the notes you've made about your brand before making any business decisions, no matter how big or small, will help you stay aligned to your true north. This will allow you to only bring the values and qualities you want to see more of into the world.

6. YOUR POSITIVE IMPACT REACHES FAR BEYOND YOUR SMALL BUSINESS

Here's a fact: you have absolutely no idea about all the ways your business helps other people. You may *assume* about specific ways, like the value your clients and your blog readers get, but the truth is there's so much happening around you that you never see or hear about.

Your impact doesn't only concern your services and the free content you provide—you're modeling a new way of doing business by example. Examples and role-models are extremely important, especially for children and youth. They encourage people to take risks and act on their ambitious ideas. People aren't interested in listening to those who just claim to be an authority, they want to see you walk your walk. We can't help but think "*If this worked for this other person, it might work for me too.*" (This is the very reason why social proof, testimonials, and rags to riches stories are so effective.)

When you become more authentic, vulnerable and ethical in your business, you're not only directly affecting your clients, vendors, contractors, and employees. Anyone who sees you and your business gets the message that this is a possibility for them as well. At the moment of writing this book, this concept that you can be more free and authentic in a business

context is only gaining momentum, and there's lots of people who still haven't gotten the memo. People are afraid that being more human will cost them their livelihood.

We can show them that this isn't the case. We can help more people to liberate themselves from the struggle of trying to fit into environments they don't belong in. You don't have to do it by yelling through a megaphone—just being yourself fully and unapologetically is enough. Humans learn through observation. If they can see you, you are teaching them.

Human Centered Brand Is Not a Personal Brand

On a more superficial level, the Human Centered Brand may appear the same as its cousin, the personal brand. This isn't the case, and I'll explain the difference.

Personal branding is applied to a single human being, regardless of the company they work for. The practical application of personal branding can look like:

- Taking professional photos.
- Polishing your LinkedIn profile and Facebook page.
- Publishing articles in relevant publications.
- Speaking at events.
- Becoming a spokesperson for a cause or an organization.

A personal brand follows people around from company to company. CEOs have their own personal brands irrespective of their companies, as do their employees. People with strong personal brands do not only bring their skills to their workplace, they also bring their **social influence**. This is why companies hire celebrities in their advertising campaigns: they're piggybacking on the personal brands the celebrities possess.

Human Centered Brands can take on the form of a personal brand for freelancers and artists operating under their own name. For other business entities, they're applied at the organization level, while each individual still retains their own personal brand.

You can use the principles in this book to boost both your personal brand, and the brand of your organization. You can share this information with your team members, and do the exercises together, so that the company brand reflects what you all have in common. Instead of only putting your own photo on your website (which reflects your personal

brand), the Human Centered Brand approach encourages you to put photos and bios of all your employees, especially the client-facing ones.

The Human Centered Brand is not just about you—it's focused on how you relate to your clients, and your team members.

Human Centered Branding Is Not for Wimps

Many business owners hide behind their business entity because they feel safer that way. They use corporate speak as a shield from deeper human interactions. **Having a Human Centered Brand requires a great deal of vulnerability and courage to form deep, authentic connections with our clients.** We need to put our guard down enough to let ourselves be seen by fellow humans.

The majority of businesses are failing at this. What you typically see on the average About Us page is something along the lines of “*We’re a team of highly skilled experts dedicated to the success of your business.*” That’s corporate-speak designed to obscure the people who work in that company. It’s smoke and mirrors they project in an effort to hide their humanity.

Human Centered Brands get to the core of who we are, and display it *prominently*. It doesn’t require you to plaster your face all over your website, unless that’s what you want to do. But every aspect of your brand—your words, your visuals, your actions, and the requests you make of your clients—tell a piece of your story.

If you prefer to be isolated from your clients, to keep things sterile and stick to the “*It’s just business*” motto, this approach is not what you’re looking for. The questions I’m asking you to answer in this book are intimate, and you might find them intrusive at times. The steps I’m asking you to take in crafting a brand that’s uniquely yours may feel risky and bold. This work is not for everyone, but if you decide to stick with the exercises and give your best effort, the results will trump every other exploratory branding work you’ve tried before.

When Is the Right Time to Create Your Brand?

The internet is overflowing with advice about what a new business owner should be doing. Blogging! SEO! Facebook ads! Webinars! Branding! Speaking! Self-publishing! Wherever you turn, you’ll be inundated with suggestions on what your next business-building project should be.

I'm in favor of doing the right thing at the right time. While all of the methods above may be effective, they may be less effective if you do them too early in your journey. And yes, it can be too early for branding as well. Each business is unique, and your path may differ from the paths of other people. That said, all businesses go through certain phases in their development, and here's where branding fits in.

1. CONCEPTION

You've gotten an idea for your business: you've decided what services to offer, and developed a basic business plan. You've ran the numbers and figured out if you charge this much, with this many clients per month, you'll be able to recover (or exceed) your day job salary. This phase can last for weeks, months, or years—it's not uncommon for people to daydream about their future business for a *long* time until they feel ready to take concrete steps.

2. PREPARATION

You're acquiring all the necessary licenses and completing the paperwork that your country or state requires you to have in order to be a legit business. You're creating pricing sheets and sales letters. You're making changes to your home to create an office space, or you're on the lookout for offices to rent. Things are moving, excitement is running high, but sometimes the excessive bureaucracy can cause frustration.

3. FINDING INITIAL CLIENTS

Now it's time to start talking to prospective clients about how you can help them. These initial clients typically come from your immediate network: acquaintances, extended family, work colleagues, people you've met at the book club etc. A method that worked for me and other folks I know is posting an announcement on your personal Facebook profile, or sending a personal individual email to people you know. (It can be as simple as "*I've started to offer XYZ services. Please message me if you're interested, or know anyone else who needs this. Thanks!*")

This is a good time to create a simple, basic website with the details of your services spelled out, so you have a place where you can forward people to find out more information.

Some folks offer their services for free to a few clients to test their offering and gather testimonials. However, offering services for free (or bartering) doesn't provide proof that people are willing to pay for your services. The testing phase isn't over until you've acquired several *paying* clients who are happy with the results.

4. BRANDING

Once your business idea is validated in the real world, it's time to prepare for expansion. Branding needs to happen *before* any serious marketing efforts, to ensure that your marketing materials and all promotion channels tell a consistent, alluring story and make a great and lasting impression.

There are two approaches to branding: the bootstrapping do-it-yourself approach which I cover in great detail in this book, and hiring a professional brand designer to take care of all your needs. Some businesses go with a professional designer right out the gate, and some do their own design for years before they decide to make the switch. I'll explain the benefits of each approach in this chapter.

5. MARKETING

Up until this point, your only source of clients was direct outreach and word of mouth. Once you decide to expand so that even people outside your immediate social circle hear about you, it's time to roll up your sleeves and get serious about marketing.

Most small businesses opt for inexpensive online marketing, while large brands dominate billboards and TV commercials. We won't cover the how's and why's of marketing in this book, but I provide some information on how to apply your brand strategy to your marketing materials in chapter nine.

6. PIVOTING (OPTIONAL)

Some businesses remain the same from the day they were conceived. My dad has had a house painting and tile installation business for 15 years, and never changed a thing—he doesn't even have a website. On the other hand, his fickle artist daughter has been pivoting and adjusting her business regularly, and each change brought a website renovation and new marketing copy.¹

Pivoting can be brought on by different causes:

- You've lost interest in your current business.
- Change in your personal life doesn't align with your current business (health issues, new baby, relocation, etc.).
- Changes in the marketplace are affecting your income.

¹ "Copy" is another term for text. In the context of websites, we differ content that offers free information (articles, videos, podcasts, etc.) from copy that is designed to sell services (sales pages, landing pages, opt-in forms, etc.)

- Too much competition makes it hard to differentiate.

Your shift may be a huge one where you start from scratch with a completely new business idea, so you need to do the entire process over again. The pivot may also be gradual, where you slightly adjust your offers and either expand your audience, or niche down to a narrower audience. Each of these changes calls for examining your brand before you go investing in a big marketing campaign.

Speaking of branding, let's examine the two approaches to it.

Bootstrapping versus Outsourcing

I believe that as soon as you decide to start your business—even if it's just a side gig you do in the evenings—you need start thinking about how your business communicates with your clients, and what kind of impression it leaves them with. Even if you're still experimenting and perhaps aren't sure who your clients are yet, make some assumptions and see how they hold up against real life. The branding process is slow and iterative, and you'll know more about yourself and your audience as you gain more work experience.

Often at the very start, new business owners don't have a lot of money to invest, and hiring a designer to create a fancy logo and visual brand can seem unreasonably expensive. This is certainly the case for many business owners I know. I would never advise business owners to hire designers before they can afford it. In the very beginning, most of your efforts should be directed at meeting potential clients in person or online and **improving your sales skills** so you can pay your expenses, save up some money for future investments, and gather testimonials.

The do-it-yourself approach has many benefits for a bootstrapping entrepreneur:

- It's as cheap as it gets.
- You can do it at your own pace.
- You can put in as much or as little work as you're able to.
- You retain full creative control over your copy and visuals.
- You can change it at a moment's notice if your business shifts.

In the beginning, when money is scarce and you're still figuring out your offers and your pricing, it's good to be flexible with your branding. Sometimes you might get an idea to revamp your website home page at one in the morning, and you can jump straight in without having to coordinate with a designer or web developer. You can make things happen

faster, and it also saves you money in case your new direction doesn't pan out and you need to pivot yet again.

When your business grows and you start getting more and more clients that require your full attention (and there are many other things in business to take care of), holding the reins of design projects can become counter-productive. After all, graphic design is a specialized skill that requires knowledge, skill and experience to do right. You might also consider hiring a brand strategist to help you with setting the foundations of your brand, and enlisting help from experienced copywriters to write engaging content and sales materials that are aligned with your brand. I can't speak for writers, but I know that in order to create a brand strategy and design the visuals that will stand the test of time, there are a few prerequisites you need:

1. A solid business model that has proven to work.
2. Understanding of your clients and their needs.
3. Enough income to ensure a healthy budget for branding.

A **business model** that is bringing in money regularly is a must before you can even think about investing in a brand. Many people have great business ideas all the time, but these ideas need to be put to the test before you pour your entire savings into them. As a rule, I don't work with clients who haven't monetized their business yet, and who don't have proof that there is a demand for their services. I think it's unethical to take someone's money, if they don't have a reasonable chance of earning it back within a few months.

You might wonder then, how come that some businesses seem to come out with a professional brand right out the gate? I'll tell you a little secret, because I work with such businesses often. Before they come out publicly with their fancy consulting company, they have already done this work on the side for months or years, either as a subcontractor for a larger agency or on their own, but without any advertising and online presence. They were quietly growing their work experience and client list, and only launched their business formally when they were 99% sure they could pull this off. (That's when they called me.) If a minimum of three people—at least one of whom is not your friend, relative or an acquaintance—has bought your service at a price that made the deal profitable for you, your business model appears to be in working order.

This book does not deal with business models and profitability, so for that you'll need to get another book or a class. I recommend the Business Model Canvas framework (it also comes in the form of a book *Business Model Generation*¹) which I've used for many of my

¹ *Business Model Generation*, Alexander Osterwalder and Yves Pigneur, Wiley (2010.)

new business initiatives, including this book. Another great resource for creative business owners is Jennifer Lee's book and home-study course *The Right-Brained Business Plan*¹. (It's not just a cute scrapbook, it also provides spreadsheets.)

Your **clients** are an important part of the equation, and you need to know them *very* well before you bring your project to a designer. The aim of the brand is to communicate with your right clients, and in order to do that, we need to know who they are as a person, as a professional, and why they buy from you. We need to know their needs and desires, both the ones they are aware of, and even those they may not be conscious of. Chapter six of this book is dedicated to this topic, and will help you get clarity about your target audience.

And then there's the **budget**—the topic most creatives hate talking about. You can get a logo for less than a 100 dollars, sure. But *great* brands don't come cheap, because they require lots of time and expertise. After you read this book (especially chapters which concern design), you'll be able to appreciate the work that goes into branding.

I firmly believe that your branding budget should only come from your savings, not from credit. I'm not a fan of people spending more money than they can afford. An alternative to using your savings is to get a small grant which some governments and organizations offer to startups, new businesses, growing businesses, eco initiatives, women business owners etc. Ask your local chamber of commerce about any sources of funding that may be available in your area.

Once you have all of the three elements in place, you're ready to start looking for your designer. Ideally, it will be a person who:

- Understands you.
- Appreciates your audience.
- Is responsive and professional.
- Demonstrates an ability to perform high quality design work.
- Has an affinity for the aesthetic that would be appropriate for your brand.

Luckily for you, there are *so many* designers on the planet you can choose from, that you never have to settle for less than your business deserves.

If you find yourself nodding your head as you're reading this, and feel like you're ready to hire a designer right this minute, wait—you'll still benefit greatly from this book. Apart from the few chapters that go into the details of creating a visual identity, the rest of the

¹ <http://www.rightbrainbusinessplan.com/>

book is all the stuff that's good to know before approaching a designer. It can prepare you so that you can get the most out of your hard earned money, and it will also help you maintain the high standards that you and your brand designer have set as you go about your everyday work.



Thank You for Reading the Free Sample of This Book!

I hope you've enjoyed it and got value from it.

If you want to keep reading the full book, you can get it in EPUB, MOBI, and PDF format on the website: humancenteredbrand.com

About Nela Dunato



Nela Dunato is a multi-passionate artist, brand designer, teacher, and writer based in Rijeka, Croatia. She's been working as a graphic designer since 2005, both as a freelancer and as an in-house agency employee. In 2013 she started her own design consultancy, with the focus of helping small businesses craft expressive brand identities and exceptional client experiences.

She teaches graphic design as a course instructor, leads in-person workshops, and speaks at conferences. Although this is her first published book, she's been writing about design, branding, marketing, business, and creativity for over a decade on her multiple blogs.

Her artwork and illustrations have been published, exhibited, and awarded internationally, though nowadays she prefers painting and drawing for her own pleasure. She is a huge sci-fi and fantasy nerd, lover of Victorian and Art Nouveau aesthetics, cat person, and a dedicated shadow worker.

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