

Branding: What Selling Really Is

by Carolyn Howard-Johnson

Branding is not advertising, nor publicity, not even general exposure. It is how all of your efforts, working together, coalesce into the public's perception of who you are, what you do.

Poets and Writers Magazine reports that Riverhead Press, ZZ Packer's publisher, "Bank(ed) on . . . name recognition" when they sent her on a 10-city tour in 2003, something that the press's publicist maintains is a rare occurrence for a first-time author.

It is unlikely that you will have the name recognition that your publisher or publicist or anyone else can count on when your first book comes out, unless you are already well known in a field and are writing a nonfiction book allied with it, or unless you've been working on that publicity before your publisher or publicist is ready to make such decisions. This is why now is better, than later and that's why your publicity efforts should not be aimed at your book early in the game, but rather at who you are, including your other writing.

One of the pitfalls I fell into even with a general background in PR and experience in another specialized field of publicity (fashion) is that I put my book—my passion—first. One day I realized that I was the one that I should be branding instead of my book. I was putting together a business card on www.vistaprint.com. I'm not very computer savvy and I couldn't get my book cover of *This Is the Place* to load. I had seen many business cards for real estate professionals that used their photos so I did the same. Then I thought, "Well, it's OK because I won't have to do much redesigning when and if I complete another book." Lightning! Of course I would write another book and that when I thought of my favorite books/authors it was the author's name I remembered first. If that author had written quite a few books -- that I might not be able to name more than one of them.

Even after this flare of clarity, I was reluctant to give up my focus on the names of my book because *This Is the Place* is a metaphor at several levels. The place is, of course, Utah, my beloved home where I was born and raised. *Place* refers also to the farm where my protagonist goes to learn more about herself, but it also refers to that singular spot inside each of us where we must go to find the courage to follow our own passion rather than those indicated by others. That's when I realized that I wouldn't have to change the name of my website for it, too, was a place, *the place*, in fact, for learning more about me and my books. I since outgrew that website (I needed control over adding and deleting my own content!) but it worked for nearly six years.

Some of the most focused companies in the world, like Coca Cola, use several related approaches to branding themselves.(Coke is it! The Real Thing!) Branding is not necessarily an all or nothing proposition. I am working fervently on promoting my passion, a campaign against prejudice of all kinds (gender, race, religion, body type,

nationality and on and on), with a literary slant on that. It matters not where my books are set or their names, "The Place" will always be that place inside of each of us that is very much like the place in the person we think we don't like for whatever reason. So a page on my new site will be carry this header.

As it turned out, my second book, *Harkening*, is not even a novel. Glad I didn't brand myself too narrowly because stationary or business cards that say "novelist" wouldn't fit for that nor would it have fit for *The Frugal Book Promoter*, or *The Frugal Editor*.. Again, "novelist" for my chapbook of poetry and "writer" seems too broad, somehow, encompassing everything from a writer of letters or a journalist to a freelance writer. This may seem like nit picking, but, in terms of branding, even one word can be important and an author working on a PR campaign will want to continue to refine her approach.

Here are some aspects of branding you'll want to consider.

- Decide what you want your brand to say.
 1. Take into consideration what you might do in the future. Your first book may be a romance but if you choose a red hot image and decide to write a literary book, you will have chosen your brand unwisely
 2. Certainly you'll want to consider tie-ins to your writing or business career from your prebook days if they will contribute to the picture you are trying to paint.
- Consider general branding as you design your website and other promotion materials.
- A look that coordinates your author's stationery, cards, invoices, your website and bookmarks is part of branding. So is your voice mail greeting, your e-mail signature, the look of your instant messaging and more. Wait, however, until just before your book is released to implement most of these efforts.

Hint #1: Once your publisher has firmed up your title you can begin to think about a banner for the book to be used on websites as links and more. If you are not handy with a computer, try T.C. McMullen's graphic talents: http://tc_mcmullen.tripod.com/editorialservices/ She is inexpensive, fast and very good or Brenda Weeaks, br_we@sbcglobal.net.

Hint #2: You won't need to have your title to settle on a logo for your stationery, etc. Your logo should fit into your general branding concept. TC can help with that, too.

- Work now on making yourself into an expert based on something related to your book. Choose the broadest brush possible. For me, tolerance is pretty broad. Book promotion is less so but that's OK. It's a niche market.
- When you're making these decisions, follow your star. It will be easier to follow though on a subject for which you are passionate.
- Don't be afraid of widening your path. This is akin to building a reputation. You wouldn't want to be known only as honest among dozens of traits you aspire to.

Hint: This rule changes when your book is about to be published. Then you will want to specifically target the audience and media that will be most receptive to that specific work -- at least for a while -- while still branding yourself.

Carolyn Howard-Johnson's first novel is an award-winning novelist and short story writer. She is an instructor for UCLA Extension's Writers' Program and has shared her expertise at venues like San Diego State's world renowned Writers' Conference and Call to Arts! EXPO. She was recently awarded Woman of the Year in Arts and Entertainment by the California Legislature and her city's Ethics award for her work on promoting tolerance. Her nitty gritty how-to book, THE FRUGAL BOOK PROMOTER won USA Book News' Best Professional Book 2004 and her chapbook of poetry, TRACINGS, was awarded the medal of excellence by Military Writers Society of America. She is also the founder of Authors' Coalition (<http://www.authorscoalitionandredenginepress.com>) and writes a blog (<http://redenginepress.com/chjohnson>) that helps authors turn a dull book fair booth into a sizzling success. Her website is: <http://www.HowToDoltFrugally.com>.