

Six Questions to Develop Your Brand Story (and set yourself apart from the crowd)

Kristina Shands
Authentic Communications

<http://authentic-communications.com>
Kristina@authentic-communications.com



Have you ever stopped to think about why one business, brand or even celebrity stands out among the crowd? Why are some people so loyal to a Ford, Honda or Chevy? How can a brand like Harley-Davidson be so strong people are willing to wear the logo head-to-toe and even getting a tattoo of the famous symbol?

Because these brands, products and companies have a powerful story that has been engrained in the culture of our society. Every aspect of their marketing and communications relies on this connection to their customers. Without that strong story, they would just be another company void of evangelists spreading their narrative to the rest of the world.

Why is a story vital to your business? How can a strong, authentic story bring in the clients and lead to financial success?

People don't buy what they need. They buy what they want. And what they want is to feel special, smart and successful. They want to feel connected to a bigger community- become part of a tribe. And strong stories create that connection.

So how can you find the story of your brand? *(Let's get one thing clear before we continue. Yes, you are a brand. And yes, you have a story worth telling.)*

Start with these deceptively simple questions and see what common themes pop up. Those unique items are what set you apart from the rest of the pack.

1. What are your top five most important values? (see attached values sheet)

Believe it or not, your values are the most important asset you have and the missing link to finding your ideal clients and producing your best work.

For example, if one of your values is stewardship, but you use bleached non-recycled letterhead, send lots of direct mail, work in an office filled with fluorescent light and don't give back to the community, then what message are you sending potential clients about what you believe?

How do you incorporate your values into your brand story?

It really is easier than you think. You insist on everything you offer, produce, write and say match up to your values. Simple, right?

It really is. My core values are freedom, fun, authenticity, abundance and creativity. Once I established these values, I took a look at my business plan, website, marketing tools and talking points.

Guess what.

They didn't match my values. What I was telling the world was not who I truly was. There was an imbalance. Something was off, and it was obvious if you took a look at my client list and bank account.

Because I took the time to really focus on who I am and what I believe, I was able to revamp everything and when I did that, everything just fell into place. My writing style changed. I am much more personal and, well, authentic, now instead of all business, sterile and void of personality.

I am in the process of redesigning my website so it is more fun and creative and offers an abundance of great information.

Finally, I make it a point to have fun everyday. It could be listening to a comedy CD, watching a funny clip on YouTube (who can resist cute kittens and puppies), going to lunch with an old friend or getting out to the park to walk my dog.

Best thing about identifying your values and sharing them with potential clients is they can determine if you are a good match for them. Your ideal clients will flock to you, but only if you are true to yourself and express your inner beliefs.

Are your values really that important to developing your business story? Absolutely. Can you have a successful business without incorporating your strongest beliefs? Sure, but why would you want to?

2. Why do you do what you do?

Wait. Don't answer yet. Too late? Let me guess. You do what you do so you can help others and make money.

Wrong. That is such an easy way out. Stop and really think about why you do what you do. You could be doing a number of other things. Why do you get up every day and take on your massive to-do list? What drives you to work 12- or 16-hour days? What draws you to your ideal client?

For me, it is because I enjoy telling a great story and I love writing. I'm also a bit nosy, so prying into other people's lives is a little like sharing gossip at the water cooler. I also love solving really difficult, messy, challenging problems. Sure, I get a thrill every time a client discovers and embraces their uniqueness, but, hey, I am who I am. A nosy problem solver who can write. And proud of it.

3. Who is your ideal client?

This is the part I struggled with the most, as do most people.

My frightened ego wants to say “everyone” and “anyone,” but that just can’t be the case. You HAVE to narrow it down. You can’t be everything to everyone. And you don’t want to be.

Some people just aren’t going to “get” you. Be honest. Aren’t there some people you just don’t want to work with, no matter how big the check?

For me, my ideal client is a small business owner or solopreneur who feels stuck and frustrated that they aren't being heard and/or understood and are having a hard time standing out among the crowd. They are working so hard to be seen (networking, marketing, advertising) but just can't find traction to move them forward. They are passionate about their business and love what they do, but can't seem to find their place in the market.

What about you? Take a break, close your eyes and imagine meeting your ideal client for the first time.

Where are you meeting? Are you in a conference room? Networking event? Bar?

What are they wearing? Are they in a business suit? Shorts and flip-flops?

How do you greet each other? Is it a handshake? Hug? Fist bump?

How do you break the ice? Do you talk about personal things, like your family or hobbies? Do you get straight to business without small talk?

How does the meeting flow? Is it structured with lots of charts, graphs and slick marketing materials? Is there a comfortable dialogue with lots of questions from all parties involved?

How do you end the meeting? Is it a quick handshake and a promise to follow up in a couple of days? Maybe you end with a hug and a promise to forward your mom's famous potato salad recipe.

How do you want your relationship to move forward? Strictly professional, as a partnership or more on the friendship level? Be cautious when thinking you've just met your new best friend. This is still a business and you must maintain some level of professionalism. But sometimes you just "click" with a client and that makes life, and work, a real delight.

How do you feel when you think about working with them and for them? Do you get warm fuzzies? Do you envision a very successful, rewarding outcome? Do you dread it? That's a sign this person may not be your ideal client. Doesn't mean you can't work with them. Just notice how you feel and look for clients that make you feel great about the work you are doing.

Try to be as specific as possible, even if you think it is too specific. You can always widen your net, as long as you are aware of what you are looking for and the type of people with which you want to do business. Most importantly, you'll be very clear on who you don't want to work with.

4. What three characteristics set you apart from the rest of the pack?

I know you are an amazing person, but try to keep it to just three unique characteristics. Okay, I cheated, too. Here's what sets me apart from my competition.

1. Quirky, goofy, personable, good energy, caring, hopeful
2. Able to see the big picture and also focus on the details
3. Transform ideas, thoughts, words into messages that people hear, understand and remember (and act upon)
4. I make things make sense

See where I'm going with that list? Dig deep and come up with things that really make you who you are. Pull in some help from family and friends if needed. Don't be afraid to be different. There are people out there looking for those exact things that set you apart.

5. What do you want your ideal client to say about you after you have worked with them?

Think ahead to the end of a big project with your ideal client. What would you love to hear them say about working with you? What would be your dream testimonial? It could be anything- professional, personal, task-oriented, skill or knowledge related. It could also be emotional- touchy feely stuff.

This is what I came up with:

Fun to work with, felt like she really got me and understood my challenges, played up my strengths and really helped me get the value of being me, marketing is so simple now because I know what I want to say, what I want clients to do and exactly what I need to do to get more clients, understand the importance of incorporating solid, powerful messages into my marketing plan and strategically using social media to stand out and get heard.

Notice how my values are incorporated in this answer? It wasn't intentional. That's what happens when you are on your true path with your ideal client. Cool, huh?

6. What is the one thing- service, product or trait do you want to be known for? What will differentiate you from others in the same industry?

Do you want to *be* the person to come to when tired of thinking small (like Michael Port)? Do you want to be the special event planner that throws the most elegant parties in town? Do you want to help new entrepreneurs get their first client?

You may offer many services, but what is the one thing that you will hang your hat on? What is the one thing that, when someone says, “I need ___”, your friends, former clients and supporters can say, “I’ve got the perfect person for you.”

Now, you have all of this great information, what are you going to do with it?

First, take a step back and set aside your answers for a couple of days. If something comes up for you that you feel like you need to change an answer, jot it down, but don’t change anything just yet.

After a few days, look back over your sheet. How do you feel? Anything stand out for you? Are you excited about what you’ve uncovered?

Is there a common thread woven throughout your answers? How about the process? Was there one question that was super difficult? Is there an answer that seems way off base now?

What I want you to come away with from this exercise is a sense of what make you unique, what sets you apart from everyone else. Believe it or not, you are incredibly special and no one else can do what you do. No one.

Jot down some final thoughts and create 1-3 key messages that you can weave into all aspects of your marketing- your elevator speech, brochure, website copy, presentations, sales pieces. Take hold of your uniqueness. Embrace your authentic self. Get ready to soar.

Once you develop your personal brand story, your ideal clients will be begging to hear all about you and your business.

Good luck.

Remember, I love gossip, so if you have any juicy tidbits to share, drop me an email a Kristina@authentic-communications.com. I look forward to hearing from you soon.


About the Author:


Kristina Shands is the owner of Authentic Communications, a messaging and branding company that helps small businesses, entrepreneurs and nonprofit organizations discover their authentic story in order to stand out, be heard and increase sales. She fancies herself a social media junkie and can often be found "working" on Google+, but really she is just looking at photos and stalking Chris Brogan.


In what some people call "spare time", Kristina volunteers with several local nonprofit organizations, mainly because she owes people a favor (yes, Jill, I'm talking to you) or she can't say no (Frank and Stanley, that's you). Obsessed with all things Mt. Everest, ice hockey, photography, indie music and Mountain Dew, Kristina spends her days chasing after four cats that hate her and two dogs that could care less that she exists.

Connect with Kristina here:

✉ kristina (at) authentic-communications.com


 Authentic Communications
PO Box 14363
Knoxville, TN 37914

 <http://authentic-communications.com>

 <http://twitter.com/authenticbuzz>
<http://twitter.com/kristinashands>

 <http://facebook.com/AuthenticCommunications>

 <http://linkedin.com/in/KristinaShands>

 <https://plus.google.com/114578425873988991891>

Core Values Worksheet

Instructions:

1. Glance over the list without passing judgment or making any decisions.
2. Mark out any value that doesn't stick with you.
3. Select 10 values that match your inner guide.
4. Narrow your list to 5 core values.

Notes:

- * Don't think too long or too hard about any of these values. Listen to your gut. It's trying to tell you something.
- * Don't debate yourself or listen to that guilty voice in your head. Again, trust your instinct and pick the values that are speaking the loudest.
- * Out of the five, there will probably be one or two that really hit home. Put a star by those. They will provide the ultimate compass in your life.

Abundance	Fairness	Passion
Acceptance	Faith	Peace
Accessibility	Family	Power
Achievement	Fame	Prosperity
Adventure	Freedom	Recognition
Ambition	Friendship	Relationships
Authenticity	Gratitude	Reliability
Beauty	Happiness	Resilience
Challenge	Honesty	Respect
Charity	Honor	Safety
Competitiveness	Humility	Security
Connection	Independence	Service
Contribution	Inner Harmony	Simplicity
Courage	Innovation	Spirituality
Creativity	Integrity	Status
Daring	Justice	Stewardship
Diversity	Kindness	Strength
Efficiency	Leadership	Success
Enjoyment	Love	Trust
Excellence	Loyalty	Wealth
Expertness	Magnificence	Wholeness
Other	Other	Other

My Top Five Core Values:

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| 1) _____ | 4) _____ |
| 2) _____ | 5) _____ |
| 3) _____ | |