
What Brand R U?

Writing ought either to be the manufacture of stories for which there is a market demand—a business as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast foods—or it should be an art, which is always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new and untried, where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values.

—WILLA CATHER, *WILLA CATHER ON WRITING*

If you write for a living—if you make a penny from your writing, or hope to—you have a brand. Maybe you have a logo, maybe you don't. Either way, you can't help but have a brand: a "name, term, design, symbol, or *any other feature* that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers"¹⁵³ (emphasis mine).

You have a brand because no one else writes the way you do.

I can't believe I'm talking about personal branding. The term gives me the willies. I picture a sizzling iron rod, headed my way. I've never felt drawn to titles like *U R a Brand!* and *The Brand Called You*. But I can't argue with the searing power of association. Take a value-neutral image, like a green square. Now, give people good experiences whenever they find themselves near that green square, and watch them gravitate toward it. Or jab people with a stick whenever they look at that green square, and watch them avert their eyes.

153. "Brand," *American Marketing Association Dictionary*, accessed February 22, 2012, http://www.marketingpower.com/_layouts/Dictionary.aspx?dLetter=B.

Marketing departments spend billions creating associations with green squares. Coke is a green square. “Where’s the beef?” is a green square. The Nike Swoosh is a green square. The Cornell University red square is a green square.

We are all, alas, green squares. For those of us who write professionally, our work does the marketing for us.

I have worked with a few writers who don’t seem to get this, or to care. They avoid revising. For that matter, they avoid writing. They say, “It’s close enough,” or “People will know what I mean,” or “Customers will figure it out.” And I have to believe that those unlucky customers do figure it out—they figure out that they’ve been left to figure it out. Who hasn’t *been* that customer, struggling to make sense of slapped-together assembly instructions, or unhelpful help topics? Who hasn’t felt jabbed with the stick of careless writing? Who hasn’t caught a glimpse of lackluster four-cornered greenness behind such writing and pledged (if only it were possible) to avoid further encounters?

How much better for a writer to ask, *Will customers figure this out?*—and then do what it takes to make sure the answer is yes. Let that be your brand. Or choose something else. Whatever fires you up, take a stand for it. Make your writing *your* writing. Explore ways to articulate your brand to yourself—to create your own green square—and then share that brand with the world through what you say and do.

You’ll know that you’ve built a brand (or maybe multiple brands) when people say about you, “Oh yes, I know James. He’s the guy who ____.” Unless your name is Susan.

Consider the following ideas:

Write a Mission Statement

My mission statement applies broadly not just to my writing career but to all aspects of my life: grow continually and help others do the same. You may want your statement to focus on commerce, maybe zeroing in on one market (like healthcare writing) or a specialized skill (like XML authoring or humor). The form of mission statement you choose matters less than the thought you put into it.

The payoff comes when you face a big decision or set a major goal; your mission statement keeps you headed where you want to go. As a bonus, if you share your mission statement with others, they'll think of you when they hear about opportunities you'd want to know about—like a hospital down the road that's looking for an XML-authoring humorist.

Sum Up Your Writing Strengths and Interests in One Phrase

Make sure your phrase conveys a benefit to hiring organizations and that it differentiates you from others who apply for the same kind of jobs. I sometimes use the phrase *detail-oriented technical writer*. Put your phrase at the top of your résumé, business card, LinkedIn page, e-mail signature, or other professional profiles.

Prepare an Elevator Speech

When you find yourself in an elevator with your next company's CEO, who turns to you and asks, "What do you do?" you want to deliver a killer answer before the elevator reaches the next floor. My elevator speech used to be, "You know your VCR manual, the one that makes you feel so stupid that you've given up on recording movies? I write the other kind of manual." Of course, no one knows what a VCR is these days. Guess I need to follow my own next piece of advice.

Keep Your Elevator Speech Up to Date

How about this: "You know those boring books on writing that your English teachers subjected you to? I write the other kind."

Volunteer

You might not see yourself as a joiner. All the more reason to join something. A brand does you no good if no one knows about it. Join a writers' group, or a local chapter of a business association, or some other bunch of people who share your interests. (If you can think of it, someone nearby has started a Meetup for it.) Volunteer for a role that uses your writing skills—and that lets people see what you can do.

Word Up!

Got an elevator speech that won't quit? Turn it into a real speech, and present it at a meeting. Take great notes? Sign up for secretary. Did you solve a problem on the job recently? Turn your solution into a newsletter article. Born to persuade? Offer to run a membership drive or create killer promotional materials.

My involvement in groups like this has helped me find writing jobs—and fill them. I've made friends, seen fascinating demos, gained skills, and discovered excellent places to eat. Bust out of your comfort zone. Volunteer. See how it pays.

Blog about Something Important to You

If you don't want to start a blog, find a blogger you like and ask about contributing a guest post. Bloggers want well-written content that appeals to their readers, and some of them appreciate breaks from having to produce it all alone.

Make a Hash(tag) of Your Tweets

A hashtag—a # symbol plus a text string, like #ThisIsAHashtag—is a powerful symbol for getting your words seen. Even if you've never in your life sent a tweet (a brief message on Twitter), someday you may find it handy to know that hashtags give tweets visibility. Add a hashtag to any tweet, and you stand to reach a crowd.

Here's the tweet I posted about this essay when I first published it, in a slightly different form, on my blog:

What #Brand R U as a #writer? wp.me/1eWPK-IO #branding
#writing #grammar #bloggers #techcom #xml #writetip
#amwriting #writers

Anyone following any of these hashtags at the time could have seen this tweet. One follower of the #xml hashtag saw my essay and pointed to it in his e-newsletter, *The #XML Daily*.¹⁵⁴ What a thrill!

¹⁵⁴ *The #XML Daily*, Mike McNamara, ed., Pubfluence, <http://paper.li/aramanc/1329738333>.

You can use hashtags (with or without capitals) with Twitter, Google+, and, probably, other social-media channels that I know nothing about. Hashtags come and hashtags go. No one controls them; people use them by unspoken agreement because they work. They give people a way to slip off into side rooms, away from the bustling party.

To find out which hashtags to use, observe. Search. Make up your own. Creative tweeter Aaron Gray says, “My fave use of hashtags is as metacommentary on the post itself. Yesterday, I used the tag #peopleplease and giggled.”¹⁵⁵ You might discover in hashtags a new imaginative outlet. Even if only a few people see your most brilliant creations, those who do will #TakeNoteAndSmile.

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#TakeNoteAndSmile.**

Caution: Don’t spam the universe with hashtag-heavy messages, though. As Gray warns, “One person’s humorous metacommentary is another person’s hashtag pollution.”¹⁵⁶ Consider these delightful messages, which turned up when I searched to see what people were doing with the hashtag #Hashtag.

#Not #Everything #Needs #A #Hashtag #Remember #That.

You don't have to add #HashTags to Every tweet you Tweet
C'Mon Grow Up it looks tacky

In general, use social media wisely—not as a megaphone, but as a tool for conversation and listening—if you want it to help you build your brand. In the words of social-marketing guru Gary Vaynerchuk, “Brands and businesses [must] learn how to properly and authentically use social media to develop one-on-one relationships with their

155. Aaron Gray, Twitter @reply to the author, February 26, 2012.

156. Aaron Gray, comment on “Make a Hash(tag) of Your Tweets,” *Word Power* blog, April 1, 2012, migrated to <http://howtowriteeverything.com/make-a-hashtag-of-your-tweets>.

customer base ... Businesses that aren't able or willing to join the conversation will likely see their balance sheets suffer."¹⁵⁷

#TakeThatToTheBank.

Start a Funniest Typos Bulletin Board at Work

Go low-tech. Analog. I'm talking corkboard. Tack up clippings or photos of amusing typos and grammar errors you've spotted, like *Support Our Scholarship Fund*. Raise awareness as you raise spirits. Colleagues' examples not allowed. Rating system optional.

Start a Radio Show or Podcast Series, or Get on Someone Else's

Are you the first in line on open-mic night? Got a thing for the spotlight? Create your own radio show, or volunteer as a guest on someone else's. For inspiration, tune in to Martha Barnette and Grant Barrett on *A Way with Words*, "public radio's lively language show,"¹⁵⁸ or Kristina Halvorson's series of podcast interviews, *Content Talks*.¹⁵⁹

Write a Book

What better way to get your name out there than to put it on the cover of a book? Anyone can self-publish now. If you've got a book in you, go for it.

Gather a good team: readers—lots of readers—and an editor, a page designer, an illustrator, a publishing expert, a publicist. (You can do it all yourself, but you'll miss opportunities, and you might do something you'll regret, like mistyping Shakespeare's birth date.) If you hire professionals, prepare to spend a surprising amount of money. Consider it an investment in learning, like taking a course in publishing, except that instead of getting a grade, you end up with a sellable product.

Figure out how much time you'll need to pull your book together. Double that estimate. Then add a year.

Be willing to be wrong.

157. Gary Vaynerchuk, *The Thank You Economy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 5, 22.

158. *A Way with Words*, <http://www.waywordradio.org>.

159. *Content Talks*, <http://5by5.tv/contenttalks>.

Venture into Merchandising

Selling stuff isn't for everyone, but some writers do it to build a brand, and they get some kicks along the way. Martha Brockenbrough, founder of National Grammar Day (March 4) and of the Society for the Promotion of Good Grammar (SPOGG), peddles proof-reader-pleasing mugs and T-shirts at "Shop SPOGG."¹⁶⁰

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Grammar Girl Mignon Fogarty has two online shops, where she sells T-shirts, holidays cards, bags, and mouse pads that sport lines like *I've got a preposition for you*, *Squiggly's head is about to literally explode*, *To infinitives and beyond*, and *Talk grammar to me, baby*.¹⁶¹

Invent a Drink

Invite some friends over to celebrate National Grammar Day, or host a birthday party for the Bard. Mark the occasion with a drink of your own concocting: the Shakespeare Shooter or the Comma Kamikaze. Brockenbrough calls hers the Grammartini.¹⁶²

Be Green and Square

You're stuck with being a green square, so be green. Be square. Be proud. Anyone for an XMLonball Splash?

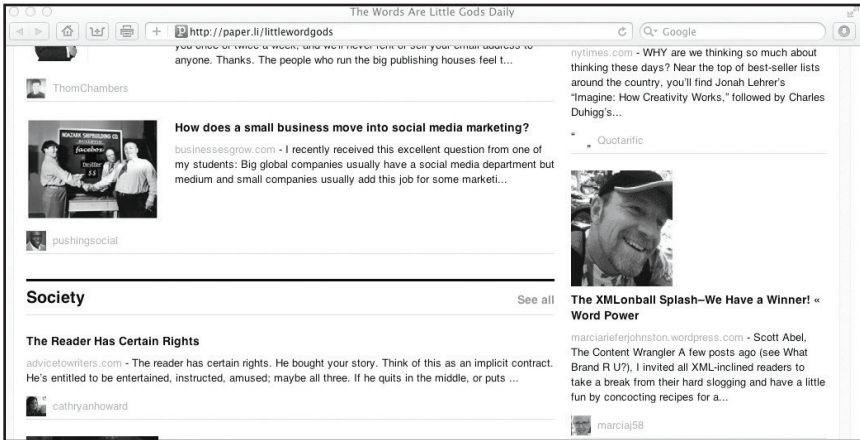
160. Shop SPOGG, <http://www.cafepress.com/spogg>. (Don't miss this SPOGG logo created with latte foam by my favorite barista: "A Mug Shot We Love," March 29, 2012, <http://grammatically.blogspot.com/2012/03/mug-shot-we-love.html>.)

161. Behind the Grammar (<http://behindthegrammar.com/shirts>) and Quick and Dirty Tips Online Shop (<http://www.cafepress.com/qdtshop>).

162. For the Grammartini recipe and all kinds of other grammar-related goodies, see "National Grammar Day," *Grammar Girl* blog, accessed June 25, 2012, <http://nationalgrammarday.com>.

Postscript

The blog version of this chapter invited people to submit XMLonball Splash recipes.¹⁶³ My only taker, Scott Abel, submitted a witty recipe, about which I then posted a tweet (with hashtags), which caught the eye of Leisa LaDell, who promoted the story in her e-newsletter, shown here. See that little green square peeking out from behind Scott's picture?



E-newsletter excerpt featuring Scott Abel, winner of the XMLonball Splash contest.

163. Marcia Riefer Johnston, "Recipe Contest: The XMLonball Splash—We Have a Winner!" *Word Power* blog, May 13, 2012, migrated to <http://howtowriteeverything.com/recipe-contest-the-xmlonball-splash-we-have-a-winner>.