Here’s How You Build Brand Integrity

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The following is an excerpt from Sean and Thora Dowdell’s Brand Renegages: Our Fearless Path From Startup to Global Brand*, out now on Entrepreneur Press*. Order it today via **Amazon | Barnes & Noble | IndieBound | Bookshop**. *Find out more about Sean and Thora at ClubTattoo.com.*

While it’s vital that potential clients are aware of your product or service, that alone isn’t enough to achieve brand awareness and secure repeat customers. The trust you build between your brand and your customers is one of the most important elements of your brand and business. The trust isn’t free, though. To get (and keep) it, you have to come through on your brand’s promise, allow customers to try out the product or get a closer look at it in action and deliver a satisfying experience each and every time.

There are many different ways to achieve this kind of integrity. We chose to give some of our products and services away to what would today be called “key influencers.” We sought out good-looking bartenders, waitresses and waiters at the local clubs who seemed to have a following and offered to give them a free tattoo or piercing if they would let all their clients and co-workers know how great their experience was with Club Tattoo. These were the social influencers who helped us build our brand by sending all of their clients to us and raving about their experience with us.

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Today, this type of campaign is even easier because local influencers can reach their followers through social media. We can easily find someone with 100,000-plus followers on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok or Twitter and track their followers to see if they fall within a reasonable radius of our business locations. If the influencer has the potential to reach our target market, we can reach out to them and see if they want to come in and get a tattoo, piercing or jewelry upgrade.

These types of influencers can have an instant impact on your business. They are not quite celebrities, but they can bring potential clients to your business just by endorsing your product or service. Don't blindly chase an influencer just because they have a lot of followers. Do the research and see if they are a good brand fit for your customers.

One possibility, which can require genuine luck, is getting support for your brand from actual celebrities. This is generally not something you can control, but you must make sure that if a celebrity does come into your store, you capture the moment. We have been blessed by late Linkin Park frontman Chester Bennington, who was a founding partner, and Sean having been in the music industry and created many connections with celebrities. They could bring stars like Blake Shelton, Miranda Lambert and Miley Cyrus into the studio to get tattooed or pierced. Over the years we have tattooed or pierced hundreds of actors, musicians, rappers and professional sports figures, including musician DJ Steve Aoki, NFL player Vernon Davis, celebrity chef Guy Fieri, pro wrestler Jack Swagger, UFC Hall of Famer Frank Trigg and hundreds more.

It seemed as if once one celebrity came in to get tattooed (and we let the world know about it), other celebrities wanted

to get work done as well. It was a giant snowball effect that has helped boost Club Tattoo's worldwide image tremendously. Of course, if you aren't fortunate enough to get celebrity endorsements, nothing helps your brand more than free press. We started with approaching some of the local magazines, which simply needed content to fill their pages, and asked them to write a feature story on Club Tattoo. Many turned us down, but it only takes one to get the ball rolling, and then you can build off that.

By 2021 we had more than 300 articles written on us, our brand and our business, as well as its impact on the tattoo and piercing industry, in such publications as *Entrepreneur*, *GQ*, *Rolling* Stone and the *New York Times*, among countless others.

Of course, getting all these interviews and articles at once is impossible. We didn't do it like that, either. We got one, and then another, and then another. Most of the time, Sean would simply reach out to the publication and ask if they were interested in doing a story. We would pitch a certain angle or an interesting take, so that it wasn't simply a, "Hey, can you write an article on us?" conversation. That would have come across as arrogant or vain, neither of which is interesting to magazine or newspaper writers.

Sometimes, it was, "Are you interested in writing an article on our new touchscreen technology?" or, "How about covering our new store location opening inside a Las Vegas casino?" We would try to find something that would be interesting to the publication's readers. Writers often need ideas for stories, and your business can be the source of those ideas, as long as they're of interest to the community. Magazine and newspaper articles can often lead to TV coverage as well. Get enough local attention in publications, and the door can open for more.

Reach out to local TV stations on a quarterly basis and ask if

they need filler content for any of their programming. One idea we used several times was breaking down what getting a tattoo or piercing looks like in a safe environment. It works, and before you know it, you will have a local news crew at your business filming for a segment. It will make your company stand out in your community and add to your credibility with consumers in the area. Club Tattoo (along with the two of us) has been featured on TV shows such as *Blue Collar Millionaires* (CNBC), *Tattoo Stories* (Fuse) and *Needles & Pins* (Vice), to name a few.

TV can have an enormous impact on your business if you can manage an appearance on the right show and solidify your presence with it. In the past 10 or 15 years, we have seen TV shows like *LA Ink*, *Miami Ink*, *Black Ink Crew* and *Tattoo Nightmares* become part of pop culture. These series have showcased the tattoo and piercing industry like no other time in history, giving tattoo artists a fame that none of them would have without the aid of TV.

The biggest downside of this type of instant fame, however, is people who develop a quick "TV brand" often open their own business even though they know nothing about actually running a business. People often show up as fans, not customers. We have turned down more TV show opportunities than we have said yes to so we could maintain our brand integrity.

Getting pitched by networks and production companies usually sounds great in the beginning stages of negotiations. But being diligent in vetting any massive public exposure of your brand is imperative before you commit to a project that could undermine your brand integrity. Production companies have asked us to create "moments" for TV shows that were much more dramatic than how we really operate at work, such as yelling at or even firing employees on camera. Some of them have wanted us to throw things at each other or get into physical altercations with our clients. If we had done these things just for the sake of getting on TV, we would have sold out not

only our company but our clients as well for a mere 15 minutes of so-called fame. No thanks.

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There’s one final way to build your credibility for free, and that’s through online reviews. Reviews of your business can play a vital role in letting your community know that you exist (at the very least) and that you’re better than your competitors. There are websites and apps that can add tremendous value to your business, such as Google Reviews, Yelp, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest and, of course, Facebook.

Use your business location and your social media accounts to promote your positive reviews, and invite your customers to write reviews of their own. Potential clients will read reviews prior to visiting or spending money in your establishment. If you are not active in managing your review content and pushing for positive feedback, any negative feedback can absolutely harm your reputation. These reviews live online forever, so it requires continual maintenance and constant attention. But it is one of the least expensive forms of marketing you can do, and it may end up being one of the most productive.

Good luck, and good branding.

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