

Why Mom and Pop Stores Should Never Overlook Their Branding Strategy – And How They Can Outshine Retail Giants

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When was the last time you entered an establishment, looked around, and thought, “This place is a real mom-and-pop shop!”

Historically, “mom-and-pop stores” were just that: small stores run by someone’s parents as a business that brought in just enough to raise their kids. Looking back a hundred years ago, you might think of a corner grocery, or a little bakery on a back street in town. These days, though, “mom and pop” can apply to any small business – though “small business” itself has expanded drastically to include businesses with up to hundreds of employees. That’s certainly not what most would think of with a mom-and-pop-type store.

At its core, a “mom and pop” endeavor is small, independent, and often family-owned and operated, hence the name. They tend to be local, with a limited audience. Though small stores can flourish in big cities, the mental image that most of us get is that of a small town, with a general store providing goods to loyal customers – many of whom don’t have much choice in where to shop. And while this may be true in small-town America, there are plenty of family-run independents everywhere you go.

But if you know that your little store has a limited audience, to begin with, it begs the question – is branding important

for a mom-and-pop store?

The answer is yes. Here's why.

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Fighting the competition

By their very nature, mom-and-pop shops don't have a lot of resources to draw on. In the era of globalization, this can make it even more difficult for small businesses to keep up.

It's a fact that the financial state of the average citizen tends to be unstable. Jobs come and go, and the economy seems to be rocking more and more every year. With the rising cost of living, consumers are increasingly searching out cheaper products—and big businesses, outsourcing to other countries for manufacturing, are eager to oblige. If you can get a product online for a fraction of the cost of buying it at a local store, it seems like an obvious choice to make.

Luckily, there are some initiatives that are giving mom-and-pop shops an edge on ecommerce and big business. Small Business Saturday was founded in 2010 to encourage shopping locally; in its wake, hundreds of variations on the theme have popped up in communities across the U.S. Spending money in small local stores has become a point of pride for many, even if they spend more there than they would online.

However, branding still makes a difference for small local businesses, even if they have a limited audience. Part of that is due to the brand personality.

Make it easy to shop local

"Branding" as a whole incorporates a lot of things. It has visual aspects, such as a well-designed logo. Advertisements

and campaigns fall under branding, too. However, a mom-and-pop store's branding strategy emphasizes elements that are more important than your logo.

Think of it this way: branding is the process of introducing your business to your neighbors. Your logo is like telling them your name. But your brand personality is who you really are – not just what a shopper can find at your store, but why they would want to shop there.

A consumer might go to a big-box store for a certain product, but if you offer excellent customer service, they'll come to your business for *you*. Customer service as a big part of branding can never be overrated, especially for a localized business that survives and thrives based on connections and loyalty.

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Establish your aesthetic with a local touch

This is not to dismiss the visual aspects of branding or imply that these don't matter. Your logo, as I said, is like telling your neighbors your name. It puts a label, a mental image, in their mind. Every time they see that logo afterward, your business's reputation will come to the fore – and if it's associated with a pleasant workforce and a shopping experience they can feel good about, then your branding is working hand in hand.

Investing in your community and participating in local events is an excellent way to market your brand and network with your target audience: your neighbors. Your visual branding works along with your brand personality at these events, too – make sure that your presence, whether at a booth or as a sponsor,

is marked with your logo and your company colors to make it clearly identifiable. When your audience sees a logo they recognize, they're more likely to come looking for faces they recognize, too.

One key point to remember when designing your visual branding is to avoid taking a page out of the big box playbook. While big businesses tend towards more generic marketing to "play it safe" with a broad audience, you have the gift of knowing your audience well. Do what you can to personalize your visual branding to your local area. Logos that include local landmarks or features, business names that include the name of the town or the family who runs the store – anything that ties your business to your area and lets everyone know that you're at home there will help your store engender loyalty in your community.

A small business like a mom-and-pop store can be challenging to run in today's environment and economy. But with careful attention to branding—in customer service, in your branded visuals, and in your brand personality—a small store can grow into something truly successful.

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