

## Why Small Brand Marketers Should Play to Their Strengths

By Dan Logan

I am always fascinated by the number of marketing people who work for small brands yet study and take their cues from the behavior of big brands. Yes, a few big names – think Apple, JetBlue, Vanguard – hold valuable lessons, but most mega-brands survive today not through great marketing or client-centric innovations, but because they have considerable resources and few competitors. In some fields, like telecommunications, banking and credit cards, the big brands wield nine-digit media budgets, but sustain most of their customers through simple inertia. Customers don't necessarily have a passion for the company; it's just that switching brands is a hassle.

It may seem ironic, but the bigger the brand, the harder it can be to focus marketing efforts on what the customer wants, be it value, product innovation or a high level of personal service. A big firm must be too many things to too many people. But small firms need not have that problem, and for that reason, it's often wise to ignore the big brand marketing strategies and focus on your own unique strengths.

### 1. Go deep, not wide.

Unlike mass marketing, niche marketing doesn't require big media buys or multiple distribution channels. What it does require is an understanding of your market and building a deep relationship with your customer. And in most market segments, there are many ways to do this.

Just look at Paul Stuart. They've been a leader in upscale menswear style and fashion for more than 70 years. They understand that a segment of the male population wants high-end, fashionable and well-made clothing to stand the test of time. But if you want a Paul Stuart dress shirt or sportscoat, you can only buy it from one of three U.S. stores or on their website. Limited distribution and promotional dollars are not a liability to the Paul Stuart brand. Instead, they are an important asset. Paul Stuart has spent 70 years focused on the quality of their product, fashion innovation and consistent, high-level, customer service. The result: the wardrobe their clients wear, and the brand endorsement that makes, has been key to Paul Stuart's success.

### 2. Focus on your story more than your budget.

Some might say that the best way to boost your brand is to be a big media spender or rack up friends on Facebook. For some brands like Geico or Bud Light you could say that strategy has worked.



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But for obvious reasons, most small brands can't go that route, nor, necessarily, should they. Today, small brand marketers can console themselves with the fact that the internet and social media helps to level the playing field and leverage awareness. But they should also remember that sustaining digital media efforts can gobble up considerable human resources. And, at the end of the day, most consumers aren't choosing their food, car or smartphone because they've been bombarded with a particular brand message on a particular media. People select one brand over another because they believe it's the right product for them, and they believe that because they've heard a well-thought-out story for that brand.

For example: Motel 6. It's one of many roadside hotel chains, but it has spent 20 years telling a consistent story to price-conscious travelers. "We'll leave the lights on," says Tom Bodett, giving a folksy twist to a great brand story. It's a small budget campaign, yet it connects with the audience at a very human level, and is far more effective than many more expensive approaches.

Another example: Tom's of Maine, the personal care product-maker that only uses natural ingredients, with no chemicals and minimal environmental impact. For some customers, that brand idea is a powerful one and they'll embrace it without ceaseless, pricey reminders from social and traditional media.

Both of these companies are good examples of how you can grow your brand with the power of your story, rather than the size of your budget.

### **3. Give thanks for being small, and play to your strengths.**

Small brands often exist below the radar of most consumers. That can be an advantage. A few years ago, when big names like AIG, General Motors and Bank of America were seen as "too big to fail," they received tremendous media attention on matters like executive compensation, financial performance, layoffs and stability. Wal-Mart spent years tied up in a class-action lawsuit over gender bias that went all the way to the Supreme Court. Amid these kinds of headlines, it can be hard for a company to keep its public image focused on clients and their needs. When it comes to brand building, bigger is not always better, and wide awareness or a big network of Facebook friends is often no substitute for a small band of passionate clients who will recommend you.

No matter where you live, you'll find smaller banks offering free checking and other services as a contrast to the fee-hungry big names, specialty food stores offering local produce to compete with chain supermarkets, and coffee shops and drug stores branding themselves quite differently than Dunkin' Donuts or CVS. No matter what a big brand says in its advertising, customers will decide over the long run whether the product provides the value they expect. The marketing game gives small companies – with their focus on innovation, service and passion – a chance to compete. And that's good for both business and the consumer. The key, for the small brands, is to play to your strengths.

Small brands have a lot of advantages. Whether you're marketing for the short-term or the long, keep them in mind, and you can improve your odds of success.

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