

“Every brand should be doing the TWIST.”

Raul Leal, CEO of Virgin Hotels

TWIST

**How Fresh Perspectives
Build Breakthrough Brands**

JULIE COTTINEAU

Founder of Brand School

TWIST

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info@panomapress.com

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CHAPTER 2:

TWIST APART FROM YOUR COMPETITION

Take Off Your Brand Blinders

As a small business owner or entrepreneur, you are more than likely walking around with “brand blinders” on. This is when you spend so much time following the branding and marketing rules of your category that you end up completely blending in. Look at the marketing of your nearest competitors. Is there anything that you really admire or really stands out? Chances are no. In fact, if you printed out the home pages of five brands in your competitive set and crossed out all of the logos, would you be able to tell who is who? If you looked at all these printouts would most of the imagery look the same? Is there a predominant color that everyone is using? Are the key messages identical? If so, then you need to step away and take off your brand blinders.

Let me give you an example. Close your eyes and think about any bank you know. Think about their logo. What color is it? Chances are strong that it is predominately blue and red. (Citibank, Bank of America, HSBC and Chase all follow this rule.) Then imagine there was a section on the website talking about saving for retirement. Close your eyes again. What’s the image you see? When I ask this question in my Brand School workshops, everyone immediately blurts out the same image: “Stylish couple in their 60s who are fit, dressed in white, and usually walking barefoot on a beach. They have short gray hair

and piercing blue eyes that look off into the sunset with longing. They appear to have confidence in their financial future.”

Try this again using websites for health coaches. There will probably be lots of logos with sunrays, waves, or overlapping concentric circles, plus women in yoga poses and rocks piled up on top of one another.

TWIST Away From The Pack

Why is fitting in a problem? As a business owner your potential customer is not just living in a world where your brand exists. As consumers we are overwhelmed with choices (it is estimated that we see 1,500-4,000 ads a day, but remember only 76), so standing out becomes critical. [Source: Belch & Belch: *Advertising and Promotion*]

Let’s consider Starbucks, which comes up often on my students’ best-loved brands list. Does it look and feel the same as other coffee shops? No, it doesn’t because it has a unique living room-like atmosphere with comfy leather chairs, and the employees wear green aprons and look more like Italian baristas than typical fast-food servers. There is even a unique language spoken at Starbucks with a tall, venti, or grande replacing traditional sizes. Starbucks stands out because of its unique TWIST on the typical coffee experience; it has reinvented the definition of what a coffee brand should look and feel like. As a result, Starbucks is able to charge a substantial premium for its coffee over competitors even though blind taste tests have revealed that consumers prefer McDonald’s coffee for taste. People are paying for the brand experience Starbucks provides regardless of the taste of the coffee. [Source: *Consumer Reports*, August 2009]

To highlight my point, when is the last time you said to a potential client or networking connection, “Let’s meet at McDonald’s and discuss this project”? You haven’t because Howard Schultz, Starbucks’ creator, created a different kind of coffee experience based on community not coffee. That is his TWIST.

Services, Not Just Products, Also Need A Strong TWIST

This sense of sameness is not just an issue for product branding, it’s an issue for service companies as well. Often companies pitch with the same approaches and the same benefits, such as providing high quality, responsiveness and trustworthiness in their services or products. The words may be true but they have lost their meaning. Remember in the Peanuts comic strip all Charlie Brown heard was “wah, wah, wah, wah” when his teacher was speaking? In my Brand School class we often use this expression to describe undifferentiated brand promises and the effect they have on your clients’ ears.

I experienced this on my first day as the vice president of brand at Virgin Management. After 20-plus years on the agency side making the pitch, this was my first time on the client side buying the services. We were looking for an agency to help us with branding for the Virgin Music Festival. We called in five talented firms on one day and heard one pitch after another. Although these were great firms that had come recommended by respected sources, they all sounded the same.

Each talked about their “proprietary process” (which was nearly the exact same steps in the exact same order and therefore not

so proprietary). After a few hours of this “wah, wah, wah, wah” we were beginning to give up hope of an agency that could help us deliver a standout live music experience. Finally an agency came in with a TWIST. Instead of presenting the same credentials and processes, they focused on the music. They told us about their employees as people, their music tastes, what they liked about live events, and what they thought could be improved. They even showed photos of their creative team attending past Virgin Music Festivals (later called the Virgin Mobile FreeFest in the U.S.) to back up their claims. Their TWIST on presentation and personality broke through the static noise of the pitch day. They were hired, and it was the start of a long and productive relationship.

Connect To Your Audience With A TWIST

What did this agency do right? And what can your business learn from this? They put themselves in the heads of our consumers, which showed they would really help us brand effectively to our end-user. They shared some relevant, personal information that helped us see them as people we would like to get to know and work with.

I had a similar experience when visiting colleges with my daughter. After a while it is really hard to tell one school from another. They tell the same jokes: “Undecided? That’s our most popular major.” They emphasize the same benefits, and many even look the same with the same brand colors and logo styles (think blue or red academic shields) and often an undifferentiated style of “classic collegiate” architecture. If you did the website test where you blind the logos it would be truly hard to tell one school from the other. All of the sites

feature smiling students, working in groups in the science lab, or having friendly but academic discussions out on the college green with blooming trees and ivy-covered buildings in the background.

After visiting nearly 20 schools, one college stood out for a very small, very inexpensive and highly impactful TWIST. We were in the middle of the hour-long tour and were in the cafeteria. We were listening to the same litany of dining benefits (choice, vegan, kosher, open 24 hours) that we heard everywhere else. However, the student tour guide broke from the expected script and encouraged us each to take a cookie or muffin as we passed the bakery case. This small gesture was really appreciated by the parents and students on the tour, it hardly cost anything, and it helped the tour guide make sure the hungry and tired parents and kids were able to continue to pay attention and absorb his message points.

Start Paying Attention To The TWISTS Around You

Become aware of brand experiences. Notice when you are having a positive brand experience, one where you are not just *buying* something you are *feeling* something. Make a note of the specific elements that are contributing to that feeling. It could be a small gesture like the cookie, an authentic story like the creative agency for the festival, or a fresh environment and unique language like Starbucks. Think of an idea that is inspired by these TWISTS and apply it directly to your brand to create something fresh and powerful. The trick to TWISTING is that it is an ongoing activity, not something you engage in every once in a while. You need to become a keen and constant observer of the larger brandscape. Always be thinking about

your customer and what they need, and how you can apply lessons from other great brands to make your brand experience stronger and more unique.

Become An A+++ TWIST Master

In order to be an A+++ master of TWISTING, you need to follow the three As.

- Be **AWARE** of successful brand trends and practices all around you because your customer doesn't live in your category, they live in the larger brandscape. They are exposed to lots of messages, and only tune into the ones that break through. When you are in the mall or the supermarket, walking in town or the city, driving in the car listening to the radio, at the movies or watching TV – anywhere you go – start to notice brands that have interesting and unique messages. This can be distinctive packaging, TV ads, billboards, slogans, or brands that you hear your friends raving about or posting on social media. Carry a notebook around with you or record interesting brands with your cell phone camera. Becoming more brand aware – across all categories – is the first step.
- Then **ANALYZE** what is working. What human emotions and larger truths are being tapped into? What executional best practices do you see? What specifically is making you take notice? What is connecting with your heart, not just your head? Try to isolate specific strategies and techniques. Not just “that billboard was cool,” but “it made me laugh, it was different from what everyone else

is saying, it tapped into something I believe in or have been thinking about lately....”

- Lastly, APPLY these insights directly to your brand and act on them to create new ideas that you bring to market. Live in beta, that is, don't wait for an idea to be perfect, as perfection can be the enemy of progress. Get it to a point where it is good enough, then try it out – see what's working and what's not and then keep refining.

A Small Company Can Offer A Big TWIST

As a small business or non-profit, your best competitive advantage is standing out. What good is spending even one precious marketing dollar on an ad or a website if it's not going to break through? Your unique brand story is what customers want to hear. If they have made the decision to even consider smaller brands, they are eschewing the anonymity of big brands and are looking for a more personal connection.

Authenticity and personal connection have always been a competitive advantage for small businesses, but now it seems more so than ever. We are in the midst of the age of the entrepreneur, and perhaps this is in part a reaction to some of the mistakes and failures of some of the larger global brands (Enron, Lehman Brothers, BP). Or maybe it's because the global economy and politics feel a bit overwhelming and out of control. Regardless of why small businesses are resurgent, stop trying to pretend you are bigger than you are, with more offices and employees, and celebrate the fact that you offer deep connections and localized expertise.

Linda, a Brand School student, has a family-owned insurance agency that celebrates its roots in the community. This includes a unique TWIST of sending out email advisories during bad weather with very localized updates on specific road closings and streets to avoid. This is something the larger companies could never do. And Linda's customers are grateful. It's one thing for an insurance agency to talk about its auto insurance policies, it's another for it to actually keep you safe on the road.

What makes your approach different? What is there specifically in your background that makes you better qualified than the next “quality” provider to provide an extra edge to your clients? Let your authenticity and humanity shine through your brand.

How can you do this? There are several approaches and here are a few examples.

Share Your Founder's TWIST

A great TWISTING strategy is to share the origin of how you came to create your brand. How did you first get the idea? What influences in your childhood or working past led you to this point today? Remember, this is a story that is more of a memoir than a biography. Craft it by leaving out points that are confusing or don't help to paint a clear picture of your path and TWIST.

Barbara, a dentist, decided to go into dentistry after her father (a working class, first-generation immigrant) had spent all of his savings on a set of partials that were poorly made, which led to gum disease and the loss of his teeth. She carried those partials in her pocket all through dental school as a powerful reminder of why she wanted to help people so they wouldn't have to suffer like her dad. This is a beautiful TWIST with a very memorable image and she uses it to connect with her ideal target - people who feel their smiles are fundamentally linked to their life stories.

In my own case, my passion for branding began when I was eight years old. I had a pretty nice childhood in Marblehead, Massachusetts, in the early 70s. While I was a happy little girl, one thing was missing. I desperately wanted a pet: a dog, cat, hamster, something fuzzy to call my own. Unfortunately, my older brother was allergic to pet fur, so an animal was out of the question. Being eight, I went into our backyard garden, got a rock, put it in an empty Cool Whip container with a few blades of grass for nourishment, poked a few holes in the lid for it to breathe and ...voilà, instant pet rock. My parents looked at me kind of funny, but they were glad the "pet crisis" was over. They wouldn't realize I was a branding genius until a few years later.

In 1975, Gary Dahl, an advertising executive from Los Gatos, California, was sitting in a bar listening to friends complain about their pets and how they needed to be constantly walked and fed. He got the idea of creating the perfect no-maintenance pet. This led to the idea of selling Pet Rocks to people, complete with instructions. The instruction book was the real product,

which was full of gags and puns. The fad was short-lived, but that was enough to make Dahl a millionaire.

He “stole” my idea. Of course, I was still a child and I didn’t have the same wherewithal and resources as Gary to bring this idea to market. But I think it’s an important story and one that I often tell when speaking to groups of aspiring entrepreneurs and even senior marketing and branding executives. My story has several important messages about branding and the importance of TWISTING. It has also become a key touch point in my own personal branding story.

On the surface, Gary and I have nothing in common: we are different ages, have different occupations and live in different parts of the country. But there are actually a lot of similarities to our stories:

- We were both trying to solve a consumer problem (mine was for a non-allergenic pet, his was for a low-maintenance one).
- We both TWISTED to think of a unique solution to an old problem. Rather than work within the traditional pet category to come up with our solutions, we looked elsewhere – to a rock.

The big difference between us was that my idea stayed within my immediate family and Gary managed to package and market his idea and share it with the world. Over time I came to recognize the importance of getting things out into the marketplace (versus waiting for everything to be perfect) and this bias toward action has become part of what drives me as a brand consultant and has become part of my personal TWIST.

Step Away To See Your Own TWIST More Clearly

Sometimes your TWIST is something that is so fundamental to your personality you actually overlook it. This is why it's a good idea to write your brand story and then have someone else review it. Often other people have the required distance to see important elements that you are overlooking or that you might be omitting because it feels like you are bragging. But you need to be passionate about your own brand TWIST – if not, how do you expect others to get excited about it?

Liz, a graphic and web designer, is an avid amateur trapeze artist. Every waking moment that she is not spending creating websites and logos for clients is spent flying through the air – trying to master catching the bar from her partner and completing some aerial trick. Even though she is often bruised and bloodied from her trapeze practice, she can't get enough of it. Through her work at Brand School she realized that her love of acrobatics wasn't just a side hobby. It revealed something fundamental about her personality that was, in fact, very relevant to her design business. It is all about trust. Being able to let go of the trapeze bar and reach blindly for the hands of the other trapezist about to catch you is a proof point of a whole new height of relationship commitment. She began to infuse her branding with her love of trapeze. She rebranded her design services as “big top services,” using an elegant circus visual design motif, and began deliberately talking about her hobby – presenting it as a “combination of fearlessness, honesty and creativity that you won't find anywhere else.”

Most importantly, she related this philosophy directly back to her approach to working with clients to create impactful designs. This trapeze TWIST is now infused throughout her rebranded website and really makes her stand out. By embracing and owning her TWIST she is able to present herself and her business as fearless, unique, creative, flexible and a devoted partner.

TWIST For A Name That Stands Out

The name of your company, product or service is your declaration of what you stand for. But too often small businesses gravitate towards “me-too” names with no personality or TWIST.

Focusing on a unique brand TWIST for a company name versus following the category norms is why Apple is a more distinctive name than Microsoft, Uber stands out versus Dial-a-Car, and Starbucks breaks through in a category of Dunkin’ Donuts-sounding brands.

A name alone can’t make or break a brand, but it does help to start a positive conversation with prospective customers by helping them understand quickly what you are about, what’s different about you, and how you can help them. Just as you don’t want your website and logo to look like all of your competition, you don’t want your name to sound the same either.

Ryan and Rick are a dynamic duo with their own digital marketing and design firm. While they are very good at creating brand names, logos and websites for clients, they were stuck about what to do for their own brand. Ryan and Rick hated their company name and were embarrassed by their uninspired website. Their business name featured the concept of “creating a buzz” and it was chosen when the business launched “just to get something out there.” They soon realized that it wasn’t at all unique and didn’t have a TWIST since many marketing companies, PR firms, digital companies and advertising agencies are all talking about buzz. In fact, it is such an overused term it no longer has any cachet or buzz factor. The name also didn’t reflect their personalities, which are more fun and quirkier than the tired name would lead you to expect. So having a “me-too” name with no TWIST was not ideal for a talented company trying to convince other small businesses that they had what it takes to bring their brand to life in a unique and creative way.

This pair couldn’t agree on a new name, and couldn’t move forward with updating their brand. Then they enrolled in Brand School, took a step back and first defined their TWIST – what was really special about them. They spent time delving into their personalities, skill sets and how they were different from the multitude of other local digital design firms. Finally, they agreed that it was their ability to integrate all aspects of a client’s marketing (logo, digital, traditional) and make these elements “play nice together” and they discovered the foundation of their TWIST. Once they landed on this brand

idea they quickly came up with a new name, logo and design system that they were both excited about. They redid all of their own marketing materials in just two weeks!

Authentic TWISTS Create Connections To Your Target

Use your flaws to draw others in, to help them see themselves in your brand and want to be closer to it. One of my most popular Facebook posts was loosely related to branding but had a personal TWIST, which I believe drove its popularity. I recounted the story of how my twelve-year-old son complimented me on my new Nike running shoes (which was a *big deal* coming from a kid who, like many boys his age, was obsessed with sneakers). I was enjoying the moment, proud of my new “kicks” and the cool mom points I had scored when in the next breath he said, “Too bad you ruined your look by wearing them with your Adidas tennis socks.” I posted this anecdote along with the summary line: “I guess this was one TWIST that didn’t work.” I got lots of likes and comments and it reminded me that it’s important to show some vulnerability. I don’t always have to be the branding expert sharing my insights; sometimes I can just be the mom trying to get a little admiration from my kids. This authenticity is an important part of my brand and something my target relates to.

Tim runs an aquarium supply company and has an impressive list of professional credentials including a Ph.D. in ecology, evolution and marine biology. The “about me” section of his

website was a laundry list of academic degrees, published articles, industry titles and honors, but it practically required a Ph.D. to read and understand it. The problem? His ideal target included regular “Joe” aquarium enthusiasts who are looking for support in keeping their aquariums healthy and vibrant. Through the work Tim did in Brand School, he transitioned his brand idea from “science-based solutions” to “success at any level.” He deliberately presents a less intimidating, more welcoming user experience where buyers feel more at ease to interact with the brand and ask more questions, in order to ensure that they are buying the right aquarium products for their specific needs. In the context of this revamped and more approachable brand communications, the old “about me” narrative really didn’t fit.

The solution? Trimming his story down to the most essential credentials and then adding a more human TWIST. His revised story starts with this line: “I got my first aquarium at age six after killing two goldfish I had won at a school fair. Responding to the pleas of help from my mom, my uncle brought over an extra tank from his dentist office and showed me the basics. I still have that aquarium!” Do you see the difference this personal and authentic TWIST adds? It makes his brand more approachable, more relatable, and more likely to attract the amateur aquarium enthusiast who might be turned off by a brand that seems too scientific and overly authoritative.

You don't have to be a solopreneur to share personal elements. If you work for a small or medium-sized business, you can still be authentic. Do this by bringing the founder's story to life in a more personal way or celebrate the unique personalities of the current employees.

One of my favorite TWISTS is from Innocent – a very popular fresh smoothie brand in the U.K. This is the engaging story about the origin of the company that they tell on their website: “We started Innocent in 1999 after selling our smoothies at a music festival. We put up a big sign asking people if they thought we should give up our jobs to make smoothies, and put a bin saying YES and a bin saying NO in front of the stall. Then we got people to vote with their empties. At the end of the weekend, the YES bin was full, so we resigned from our jobs the next day and got cracking.”

This approachable and self-deprecating tone of voice is consistent throughout their brand communications. In fact, another interesting TWIST is that they change their packaging labels quite frequently. Often they mix up the copy on the ingredients. One such label listed the ingredients as: “2½ pressed apples, 6 crushed strawberries, ½ mashed banana, a dash of freshly squeezed orange juice, and a few small pebbles*.” There was an asterisk next to the pebbles and a comment further down at the very bottom of the label stating: “*we lied about the pebbles.” This may be a small TWIST, but it's part of an overall approach and quirkiness that keeps customers coming back for more of Innocent. They have created a legion of loyal fans and have become a successful powerhouse in the drinks industry.

Express Your TWIST Consistently

You may get bored telling your story, but while it's repetitive to you, it's new each time for each new listener. Often people need to hear your story multiple times for it to register. And storytelling can be visual as well as verbal. A key element of my own brand story is the color purple. When I created BrandTwist and Brand School, I deliberately chose this color because it helps me stand out from the corporate branding agencies that use more conservative colors (grey, light yellow, red). I wanted to signal from the start (here's my TWIST) that I was going to bring my passion and personality to the table, and in turn, this was going to help my clients and students find and embrace their own unique TWISTS. So rather than just use purple on my website and business cards, I decided to embrace it in my wardrobe. I do a lot of presenting in front of live groups and in tele-classes as part of Brand School, so I decided that when I appear as an ambassador of my brand, I will always wear purple.

I hadn't realized how important this color had become to my brand TWIST until one summer evening during an appearance as the keynote speaker for a presentation on branding. Prior to the presentation, I was mingling with attendees. One woman, who I had not previously met in person, came running up to me to introduce herself. She excitedly shook my hand and breathlessly explained to me that she was a big fan of my work and of BrandTwist on Facebook. Then the conversation came to an abrupt halt. She took one look at my open-toed sandals and my red toenail polish and her face dropped. She said to me: "You know, you really should have purple polish on your toes." I had to admit that she was right. If purple was part of my TWIST, I should embrace it – from head to toe. And now I do.

Find The Right TWISTING Partners

Once you've found your unique TWIST, how do you bring it to life? This is where the right design or marketing partner can really make a difference. One of the biggest mistakes I see business owners make is hiring someone to do their website primarily because they have previous experience in their category. Look instead for a partner whose designs connect to their targets and break through. Ask them specifically how they would bring their own TWIST to your brand. How would they approach branding your law firm if you were a vodka or fashion brand? Include in your brief to the designers a list of brands outside of your category that you admire, and most importantly, why. These inspirational brands can be chosen using many factors. It could be a visual style or color that stands out, the way the brand seems to understand its consumers, extra features, or even the tone of voice the brand uses. The important thing is to delve into why you think it's effective, how it is meeting a similar need that your target has, and how it can inspire your unique brand solutions. Then discuss how you can leverage these TWISTS for your own brand.

Not long ago I was contacted by a financial services technology company in Boston that was disappointed with its current branding. They were looking for a resource to help them create a new brand position and fresh look and feel that would really break through in their cluttered category. They lamented that their business and all of their competitors looked and sounded alike. They were convinced that their technology-enabled cost management systems were truly better and different from the rest of the market, but they were at a loss as to how to bring this distinctiveness to life.

This sounded like a challenge perfect for me, and I told the marketing director over the phone about my experience in helping a wide range of clients stand out by using my specific TWISTING philosophy of looking outside the category for best practices and inspiration. She was really excited about this approach and wanted to double check with her boss prior to setting up a meeting. Unfortunately, her boss wanted a detailed account of my specific experience and credentials in the financial service industry, which was counter to the approach I had proposed. He wanted reassurance before hiring me that I was well-versed in the very category that he found mediocre and uninspired. In the end, I wished them well and declined the project.



Is your small business or non-profit having trouble standing out in today's crowded and competitive markets?

In your efforts to look legitimate, you're likely promoting your brand with promises, words and images that blend in instead of break through. The solution? Find your TWIST. In this book, Julie Cottineau, former VP of Brand for Virgin, founder of Brand School and a global authority on impactful and effective branding, shares her unique TWIST approach which helps businesses remove their brand blinders and look outside of their categories for actionable insights that build stronger brands and better business results. She uses easy to follow examples of actual small businesses that have successfully applied her methodology. Don't waste another minute on "me-too" marketing until you read this book and build your own TWIST.



Photo: Bob Plotkin

Julie honed her branding chops at a series of high level client and agency positions including Virgin Management, Grey Global and Interbrand. She is a highly rated and engaging keynote speaker and a global authority on impactful and effective branding. She is the creator of Brand School by BrandTwist an actionable online branding class for entrepreneurs, small businesses and non-profits.



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