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## Minding Your Business

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# Branding Yourself

by Denis Ledoux

"Branding"—isn't that about steers? or Coca-Cola and Nike? What's that got to do with the home-based lifewriting practitioner? Do I really need to be concerned with mega-corporate buzz words like "branding"?

In a word, yes. Why? because if you are making a public presence for your work, your brand is being made whether you are aware of it or not. Wouldn't you rather be in control than leave it to chance?

**Essentially, your brand is your reputation—but more.**

Branding is not important at all in the teaching of an excellent workshop. In fact, branding has nothing to do with the excellence of your preparation, the quality of your workshop content, your skill, dedication or talent. But...

**Branding is crucial in attracting the students you need to do your excellent work.** It plays a large role in whether or not your efforts will bring in sufficient numbers to allow you to continue to be excellent in the workshop! Branding allows you to compete successfully on the strength of the quality of your programs, rather than simply on the price of them.

When you are thoughtful and aware of your brand, you are influencing how the public will perceive you and your work. Branding stimulates a positive emotional response that will give you the benefit in reaching and favorably impressing potential clientele. Branding, to be plain, will bring you the paying work that would otherwise go to someone else—also known as "the competition."

Being in business is always about being more attractive than the competition in order to bring the paying work into your office. But...

Who is the competition?

It's not just other memoir workshop presenters. It's more complicated than that...

The competition—broadly defined—is everything in the world that captures your potential workshopppers' attention.

The competition—and now, let's look at it in its narrowest sense—is not just other memoir workshop presenters but also...

- those who write other people's memoirs
- videographers, photographers, and other preservation service providers.

On a broader level—and here's the real challenge—the competition is also:

- fill-in-the-blanks memory books
- camcorders and digital cameras for do-it-yourself-ers
- any and all workshops and classes—tai chi, scrapbooking, cake decorating, etc.
- sports events, bridge parties, barbecues, visiting relatives.

Ultimately your real competition is television, Tupperware parties, Monday night bingo, and most challengingly, apathy, fear of failure, lack of confidence or imagination and low self-esteem.

Your mission (should you decide to accept it) is to fill your workshops with enthusiastic paying clients who prefer your services to *any* other alternative claim on their time and money.

How in the world can you do this?—by branding yourself!

You must:

- put across that preserving lifestories in writing is an enjoyable, meaningful and rewarding way to spend time.
- advocate for writing as the most effective means to preserve personal history.
- demonstrate and publicize that workshopping is the best context for undertaking lifestory preservation
- communicate that workshopping with you in particular provides the best service and the best value available because of your unique credentials.

Here's an example from my experience. Thirty miles away in another city, a woman offers a writing workshop through the state university's Senior College. She charges \$25 for 8 two-hour ses-

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sions. I charge \$250 for ten three-hour sessions. On the face of it, her workshops are clearly a much better value: more workshop for less money, right?

My task is to convince my clientele that no, cheaper is not better where lifewriting workshops are concerned because what I have to offer (my **brand**) is better. I must attract the participants who will work best with me and my program. Those who are attracted to what only I can do for them will pay the higher fee for my service rather than take her nearly-free workshops and be pleased they did so. I have to find the people who will recognize what is special, valuable and **unique to my workshop**. So...

What do I have going for me that lifewriters want? How can I let them know about these things? Essentially I must sell myself—as you must, too. So, who am I? What credentials do I have that give me an edge and will get my future clientele's attention?

- I am a **published writer** who has won writing Fellowships (1991, 1996) and a Maine Fiction Prize (1989).
- I have also worked as a **professional writer** (credits in dozens of publications).
- I have been an effective writing coach and editor for **many** successful first time writers and have taught lifewriting in **hundreds** of venues across the country and in Canada.

Who is my competition in the Senior College example? ( I must be aware of both my own distinguishing characteristics and my competition's.)

- She has an interest in writing and has taught it at the high school level,
- She has never been a professional writer or published her writing.

So...My task is to make sure that people who will prefer to work with an experienced writer can easily distinguish the difference between the two of us. In that way, I will position myself as the better choice for them.

It is never, it should be understood, my task to up my value by downing someone else's. There are many reasons why some workshoppers will choose her program. It's not personal; it may be geographical, financial, or many other reasons.

**I want my natural clientele to recognize me as their best choice.** I don't need to put someone else out of business to do so!

I can best do this by **choosing to compete not on price but on value**. My branding, therefore, must include the messages:

- "When you study with me, you learn from a **published, professional writer**."
- "People learn writing best from a working, experienced writer. **There's a big difference between a writing teacher and a writer.**"
- "You can trust someone who has **my kind of longevity and experience** with thousands of workshoppers to know how to help you."
- "You will be working with the founder/originator an internationally known memoir program, the Turning Memories Into Memoirs® Workshop."

If I have done my branding well in my community and region, the other teacher will not be competition to me—nor I to her! (It's her job to brand what she has to offer in order to attract *her* natural clientele. Perhaps she will brand something I can't offer—her gender!)

Potential clientele will simply not perceive our workshops as interchangeable. My clientele will be attracted not to hers but to mine because I will have clearly communicated my unique features in my branding so they recognize the traits they are looking for.

I could moan and complain about how a hobbyist retired English teacher offering a workshop at a price that I can't afford to. I could see her as siphoning off my market. What a missed opportunity to brand myself and attract the very clientele I most want to work with!

While I can't really say that I welcome her cut-rate presence in my market area, I can with confidence declare that I'm not worried by it either. We brand ourselves differently and therefore appeal to different clientele.

How can you take control of branding yourself in your community in order to sell your work on its unique value rather than its price and thereby attract the very clientele who are looking for you?