

## TAKING THE BRAND ONLINE YOU ARE THE BRAND

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Large corporate businesses have one advantage over small businesses: they have more people and resources. Because they're such vast collections of individuals, and it can be difficult for consumers to understand an organization that large, branding has been developed to control how consumers feel about a company and its products and services.

A brand is a collection of symbols and mental associations connected with a company or product. When defining a company's brand, marketers seek to develop and align the consumers' expectations, creating the impression that a product has certain qualities that make it unique or special.

In a small business, your brand doesn't have to be a collection of symbols because you, the small business entrepreneur, are the brand. What you do and say reflects on all aspects of your business. You humanize your business in a way that corporate brand marketers could only dream about. When your customers call to place an order, or to lodge a complaint, they're having a real interaction with the real person behind the business. They don't need someone to align their expectations or to create impressions in their head. They'll have real feelings about your business after interacting with you or after hearing about you from someone they know.

As you move your business online, you might be tempted to take this opportunity to make your business appear larger and more corporate than you really are. This will backfire. It will force you to try to create an intangible brand to replace the real brand your business already enjoys. Use what already makes your business special: you.

Don't build a static website full of stock photos of actors dressed like business people starring off into the distance. Include photos of you, your employees and your products and services. Show you and your business in action. Describe in your own words what you do and why you do it. Don't try to include all of the popular corporate buzzwords.

Google yourself and your business's name. If the first results are some spring break photos from Cabo San Lucas on MySpace, that's your brand online and that's how your potential customers will see you. If you want to be known for your tequila expertise, maybe that's a good thing, but if you're a plumber or sell security alarms it might not be the best representation of your business.

Counteract this image by adding more content online. Start a blog and write about what you do. Answer the common questions that your customers ask. Increasingly consumers are researching their options first online, and then calling a local business for service. If someone finds the answer to their question on your website or blog, they've just had an experience with you and developed an impression of your brand. If you answered their question well, you're now an expert in their minds, and you've got a new client.

Small business branding online isn't a good logo, a special font or a catchy phrase. It's what you do and say, and how your traits come through, not just in business, but in all aspects of life. It is trust established between individuals and not as theme music.