

TEENAGE WASTE *BRAND*



How Your Brand Can
STOP Struggling and
START Scaling

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INTRODUCTION:

It Was Going So Well until It Wasn't

I began my business as a corporate refugee in November 1999 when I was two months pregnant with my second child. My patience for endless meetings, face time, and office politics had run out.

I had not anticipated leaving my job, so I had no business plan. I contacted past colleagues and professional connections and offered freelance marketing research and strategy services, skills I had built during my years of working for consumer brands Veryfine Products, Dunkin' Brands, and The First Years. At the urging of a copywriter friend, I offered writing services too.

Gillette became my first client, signing on when I was eight months pregnant in April 2000. They were wonderful, helped my brand get started, and together we deepened a meaningful professional connection that still exists today.

For the next 10 years, connections and referrals helped me build a portfolio of marketing research, strategy, and copywriting projects.

In 2008 my husband launched his own investment advisory firm. I got to help him build a brand from scratch. It was so exciting! We launched it on June 20, 2008.

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Just in time for the financial crisis.

Happily, the brand withstood this early test and took root.

After things steadied for my husband's brand, I found myself in August 2009 needing to jumpstart my business pipeline and realizing that my 10-year-old brand was not as well-defined as the one I had just helped my husband create.

The cobbler's shoeless children, right? How could I be a self-respecting marketer without a well-defined brand? Being a generalist is the kiss of brand anonymity. I knew it was time to declare a niche, define my brand, and go deep.

But I struggled with what my niche would be. For 18 months I grappled with ideas. A marketing consultant colleague urged me to choose a food industry specialization based on my corporate experience, or focus on all new products or all existing products. Nothing felt right.

I felt uncomfortable in my own brand skin. It was as though the brand I thought I knew so well was actually a mystery to me.

On January 5, 2011 it came to me: my brand is having an identity crisis!

I could finally put a name to my feeling.

But wait — identity crisis?! That's crazy, I thought. That's usually the realm of teenagers.

Teenage Memories Come Flooding Back

Nightmarish flashes of high school returned. Many classmates saw me as the nerdy girl who read every book assigned and took BC Calculus. The popular kids made fun of me. The class voted me "female class bookworm" in my senior year. My actions and values (reading and doing homework) defined my image in their eyes.

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My friends — people who talked to me in class and spent time with me outside of class — had a different perspective. They admired my academic achievements and perseverance, appreciated my kindness and compassion, and smiled at my enthusiasm for the color purple and all things French. We came together as friends through shared values and mutual respect.

It dawned on me that my brain was replaying these visions because my brand needed to stand for something that would determine the clients I would attract, the same way my teenage image had attracted like-minded friends.

My brand needed an identity.

And, like high school, my audience's experience with me would shape that identity.

As I talked to other business owners, I discovered I was far from the only one feeling stuck. Growing pains abounded. Plateaus were common across the board, and often happened after the company's initial momentum stalled.

Researching resources, I could not find any that addressed this problem. Searching for brand development advice led to information on logo design and advertising messages. Brand gurus like David Aaker had much wisdom to share on brands conceptually, but none prescribed what to do when you are stuck in the space past your start-up years but before your business had established regular growth.

As I was falling asleep on Thursday January 20, 2011 at 11:45 pm, I had an epiphany.

What if brands had an adolescence like humans? What if instead of being fully formed from the start, they needed time to explore and find their identity? And what if they exhibited adolescent symptoms to signal this phase?

Like an identity crisis.

My curiosity piqued. After some test marketing of the concept proved it memorable and engaging, I began describing myself as specializing in work with “brands in adolescence,” brands that had stalled after their initial success. I wanted to attract companies in this phase to see if my theory about brands having adolescent symptoms held true and to help them get unstuck.

This book is the result of what I’ve learned over nine years of studying brands, the way they develop, and why many of them get stuck after an initial burst of success.

In addition to working with clients who had brands in adolescence, I’ve conducted hundreds of hours of research and dozens of interviews. My research included reading thousands of articles and over a dozen books. I’ve reviewed hundreds of brand websites. Many business owners who approached me after hearing me speak shared their brand-in-adolescence frustrations and experiences as well.

To date I’ve analyzed over 160 brands ranging in size from sole proprietorships up to multibillion-dollar behemoths like Google and Facebook.

What This Means for You and Your Brand

If your brand has stalled or plateaued after a good initial run, you are not alone. I’ve encountered many founders who launched businesses in the 1990s and 2000s who have hit a similar wall. Owners who knew their brands were capable of more and could envision that growth, but did not know how to scale the wall and get past it.

Brands experience growing pains akin to human adolescence and often exhibit similar symptoms. In this book I am going to show you what these symptoms look like. I’ll help you diagnose

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your brand and then provide you with the path that can help you address the problem and get back to growth.

I am not trying to be cute or to play brand psychologist. Rather, I prefer straight talk to marketing jargon and have found the lens of adolescence helpful in understanding the hurdles brands face and how to address them.

As you read this book, you'll be able to see your brand's issues from a new perspective, one that is easy to relate to. If you've parented a teenager, you've already seen some of these symptoms in action. I'm not going to throw marketing speak at you, but rather describe each symptom and remedy in plain talk.

Symptoms of brands in adolescence include:

- Identity crisis
- Running with the wrong crowd
- Self-centeredness
- Suffering from FOMO and trying too hard to fit in
- A need to make new friends
- Defending a varsity team spot
- Oversleeping
- A need to assert independence

Not every stall or plateau signifies brand adolescence, however. Brands can encounter forces that might feel like brand adolescence but are not. These include:

- Economic downturns
- Technology shifts
- Entrepreneurial distraction

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Brands can also experience growth spurts or find a sweet-spot size and decide to stay there.

In addition to showing you what your brand might be experiencing, you'll see examples of how others have faced similar predicaments. Brands you know like Airbnb, Zagat, and FedEx. Brands you may know like Spotify, Crocs, and Life is Good. Smaller brands you may not have heard of, but that have navigated — or are navigating — their adolescence and that will share how they surmounted those hurdles. I bet some of these brands share similarities with yours.

Knowing the problem gets you on the road to solving it. I'll take you further, with approaches to solving the problem based on the symptom your brand has. Like human adolescence, course correction is rarely done in a day, but brands are resilient and these actions can help you get your brand back to growth mode.

The sooner we start, the sooner you get your brand unstuck.

To begin, we need to talk about what a brand is from a human point of view to ensure we have a common perspective — and then we'll dive right into the symptoms.

Let's go!