



5 Things We Learned While Building Brands & Websites for Wineries

Andrew Means



TRANSOM

“If you can’t sell more or charge more simply because your name is on a product, you don’t have a brand, you’re selling a commodity.”

—Seth Godin

5 Things We’ve Learned While Building Brands and Websites for Wineries

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photo by Will Foster for Hedges Family Estate

TRANSOM has been working with wineries and other businesses in the food and beverage industry since 2013. During that time, we've learned a great deal, including how our brains experience taste, why e-commerce is so hard, and how modern branding is still influenced by our ancient brains.

For this book, we whittled our experience down to five things we thought would be most interesting and helpful to wineries, and we're excited to share them with you here. We've also added questions at the end of each chapter that we hope will spark thoughts and discussions about how you can improve your winery's branding and marketing. If at any time you have questions, check out the [glossary](#) or give us a call or email; we'd love to hear your story.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Means'.

Cheers,
Andrew Means
Creative Director, Transom

The First Thing:

The Story Changes the Flavor

Modern science is uncovering surprising truths about how we taste wine — and how much of our brain is wrapped up in it.



Est. reading time: 1:45

1

In 2008, Stanford University conducted a study where researchers observed participants as they drank wine while inside a brain-scanning MRI machine.

When participants were told they were drinking a cheap wine, the pleasure centers of their brains remained quiet. When told that a wine was expensive, the pleasure receptors lit up like a Christmas tree. The trick? Both were the same wine.

You probably guessed the twist before the end, but this study uncovers a powerful truth: *the expectation we have of a wine literally changes if and how we enjoy it.* All the work that is put into a bottle of wine — the decisions made in the vineyard, the selection of the barrels, the blending, the bottles — can be for naught if the drinker doesn't have a positive expectation to accompany their first sip. Many wineries would excitedly spend \$30K on a new nitrogen generator but would balk at a professional photographer's \$5K price tag — yet each carries the same potential to shape the drinker's enjoyment.

Many wineries would happily spend \$30K on a new nitrogen generator, but balk at a professional photographer's \$5K price tag—yet each has just as much potential to shape the drinker's enjoyment.

We Taste with Our Eyes, Too

A similar [study at Cornell](#) had participants wear VR goggles while they ate identical pieces of cheese. Participants reported distinctly more pungent aromas and flavors while seated in a virtual cow barn as they did on a virtual park bench. As with the Stanford study, we find that flavor exists not on the tongue, but deep in our brains, as a sum product of our bodily senses, emotions, and memories.

Every part of a person's experience with a wine — the story told on the website, the decor of the tasting room, the texture of the labels — influences their enjoyment of that wine. Wineries that understand this make sure that every aspect of the experience reinforces the story they want to convey — so that all their hard work has an opportunity to truly sing.

SOME QUESTIONS:

- + What do you think most drinkers expect from your wine when they take their first sip? How do they arrive at that expectation?
- + What is one thing you can do right now to better craft expectation and set your wine up for success?
- + How are you distributing your resources (time, materials, money) to set the best expectations of your wine?



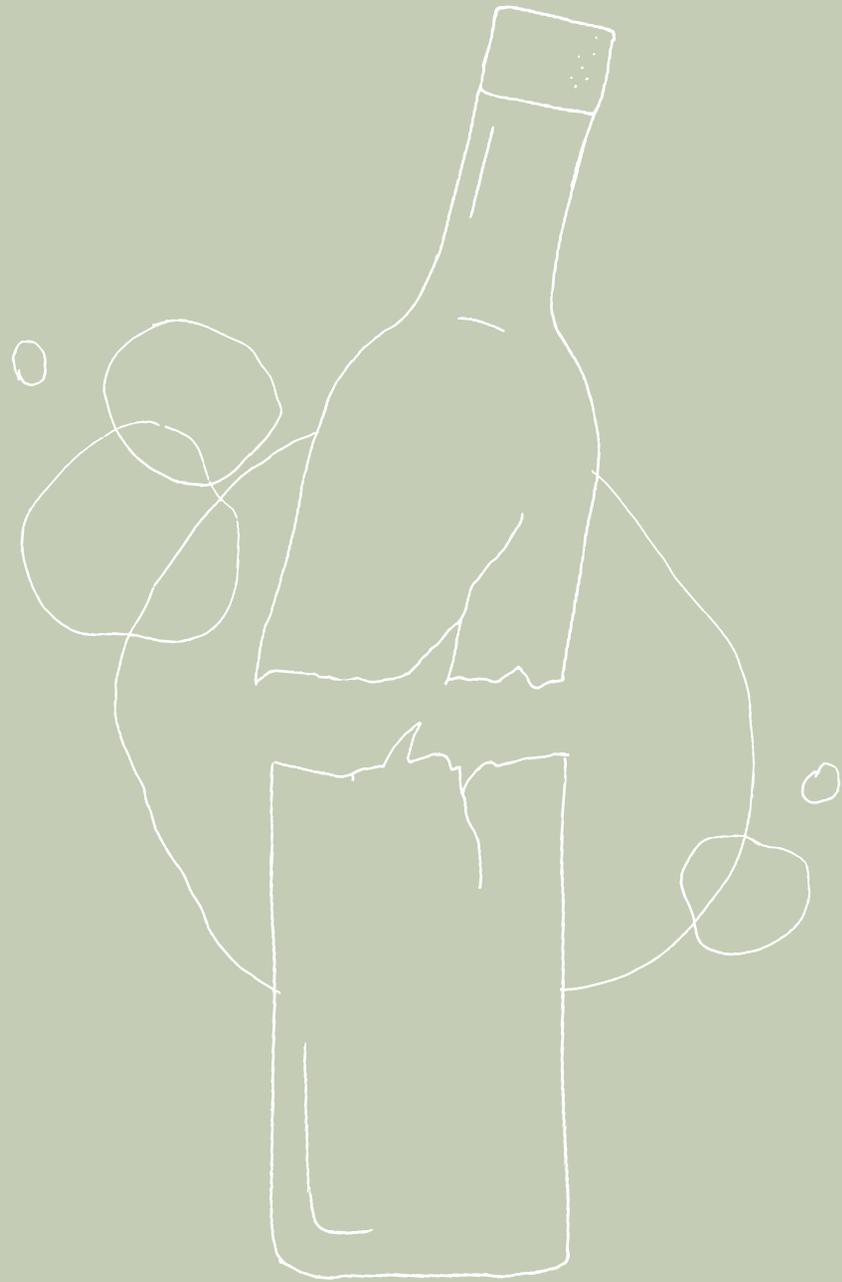
photo by Will Foster for Hedges Family Estate

The Second Thing:

It's Not Just You. (e-commerce for wineries is hard.)

Very few wineries are happy with their Direct to Consumer (DTC) software. Here's a few of the underlying reasons, along with our recommendations for the next time you're thinking of switching providers (or breaking something).

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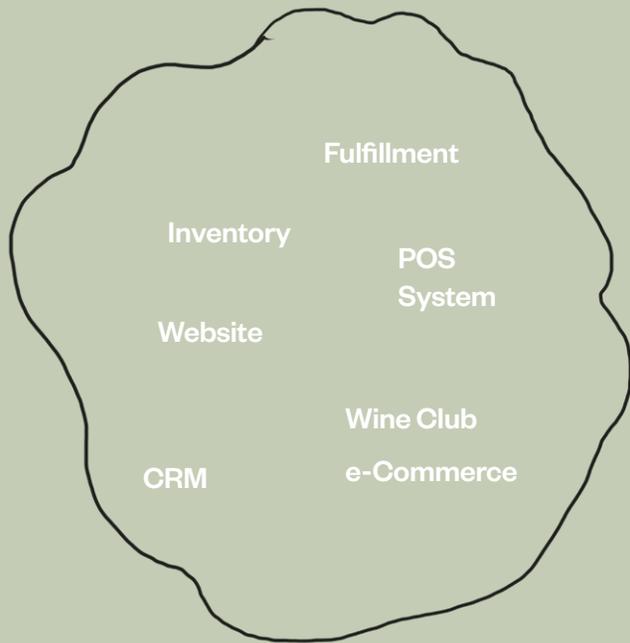
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Selling wine online is a complicated endeavor. Aside from the logistics of shipping temperature-sensitive liquid in glass bottles, you have maddening tax rates and countless regulations about what you can ship where.

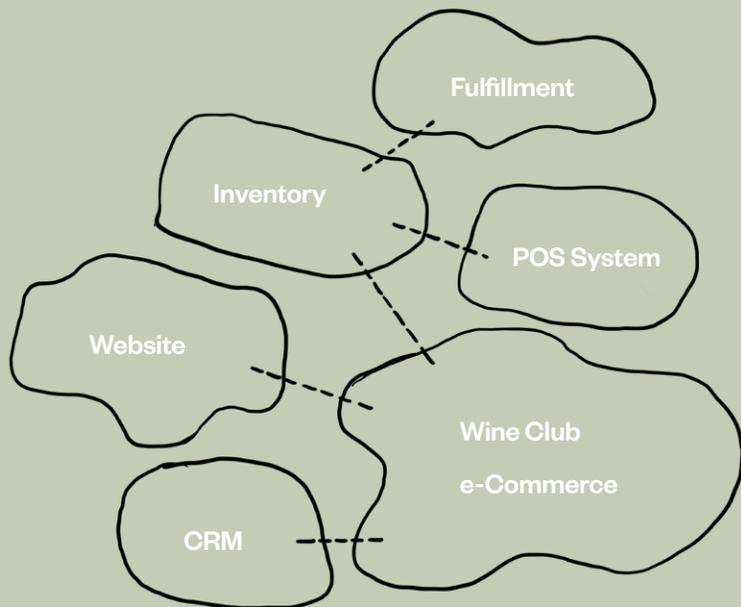
Add to that wine clubs, inventory allocations, Point of Sale, and inventory control, and you've got a shambling mound of requirements that confuse and frustrate standard e-commerce systems (and the people who use them).

A good number of winery-specific solutions have been developed to help wineries sell their wine online, yet in all our experiences with wineries, we've met very few who are completely happy with their system. Every winery is different, so we can't say what system is best for you, but we can tell you the pain points we've seen, and the ways we see a few systems working to change that.





All-in-one solutions (above) bundle multiple services together in an attempt to offer increased functionality. A modular approach (below) uses modern API connections to connect standalone services to each other, allowing for more flexibility



Pros & Cons of All-in-One Solutions

A common type of digital wine sales platform is the all-in-one solution. These solutions promise to unify e-commerce, POS, wine club, website, Customer Resource Management (CRM), and more into one seamless system. One check to write, one support number to call, all information in one spot. [WineDirect](#), [VineOS](#), and [OrderPort](#) are popular, feature-rich examples. On paper, these systems sound like great solutions, but in our experience they can be problematic. Instead of handling a few core features well, they become masters of none, often with unwieldy admin interfaces running on outdated codebases. The difficulty of changing systems should a component cease to be a good solution only compounds the problem: in order to change anything, you have to change everything. We've known wineries who can't stand their current provider, but the cost of extracting their systems from the all-in-one solution was just too great.

The Modular Path

Some systems are more focused in their offerings and rely on integrations with third-party systems to cover other functionality. [VineSpring](#), [VinoShipper](#), and [Commerce7](#) are examples of these modular systems. While this approach increases the complexity of your billing and may require assistance to set up, we find it preferable to the all-in-one system. Indeed, it is *because* these systems have fewer

features that they offer longer-term viability and flexibility. By limiting their focus, these systems can concentrate on maintaining and improving their core functionality. Furthermore, by integrating with third-party solutions for CRM, compliance, and POS, they present more options for the winery to customize, and pick the providers that work best for them.

Whatever You Do, Make it Easy

Whatever path you choose, the ease of customer experience — as customers browse your site, sign up for wine clubs, and purchase your product — is of paramount importance. Successful online retailers invest millions of dollars in making the path to purchase as smooth and hassle-free as possible. If your website's e-commerce section is cluttered, cumbersome, or it doesn't present well on a phone, you are losing sales. The question then becomes: how much can you afford to lose?

Some Questions:

- + How long does it take to find and purchase a bottle of wine from my current online ordering system?
- + Does my system look and feel clean and uncluttered? Do pages load quickly?
- + How does my system feel on mobile? On a tablet? Can I purchase using Google Pay, Apple Pay, or PayPal?

If your website's e-commerce system is cluttered, cumbersome, or it doesn't perform well on a phone, you are losing sales.

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Glossary Break

Just as winemaking has specialized terms, so too does design. Here's a quick primer on a few terms we use in this book:

Marketing:

This is an easy one, but it helps to stake out what marketing is in relation to the other terms. We consider marketing to be the active attempt to influence people to become new/recurring customers. It is a sign on a bus, it's tweeting out a coupon code, it's sending an email to your list informing them of your new release. You can think of marketing as a nudge or push to get people to interact with your company's product or service.

Brand/Branding:

A brand is the aggregate of all the beliefs and feelings about a company held by the target market. Healthy brands are ones where the public's perception of the company is accurate, distinct, and positive. *Branding* is the strategic decisions that shape the perception

of the public. James Heaton of Tronvig Group says: "Branding should both precede and underlie any marketing effort. Branding is not push, but pull."

Visual Identity:

Visual Identity is a component of branding. It's the sum of everything the public sees when it interacts with your brand, from logo to colors to typography, to packaging, etc.. Good visual identities instantly and wordlessly convey how people should feel about the brand. Is it playful? Stoic? Sultry? Sophisticated?

When we look at visual identities we ask three questions: Is it memorable? Is it distinct? Is it consistent? Healthy visual identities have all three of these qualities. **Note:** a logo does not equal a visual identity, anymore than a shirt equals an outfit. You can have the nicest shirt in the world, but if you go out not wearing any pants, you might not make the impression you were hoping for.

Messaging:

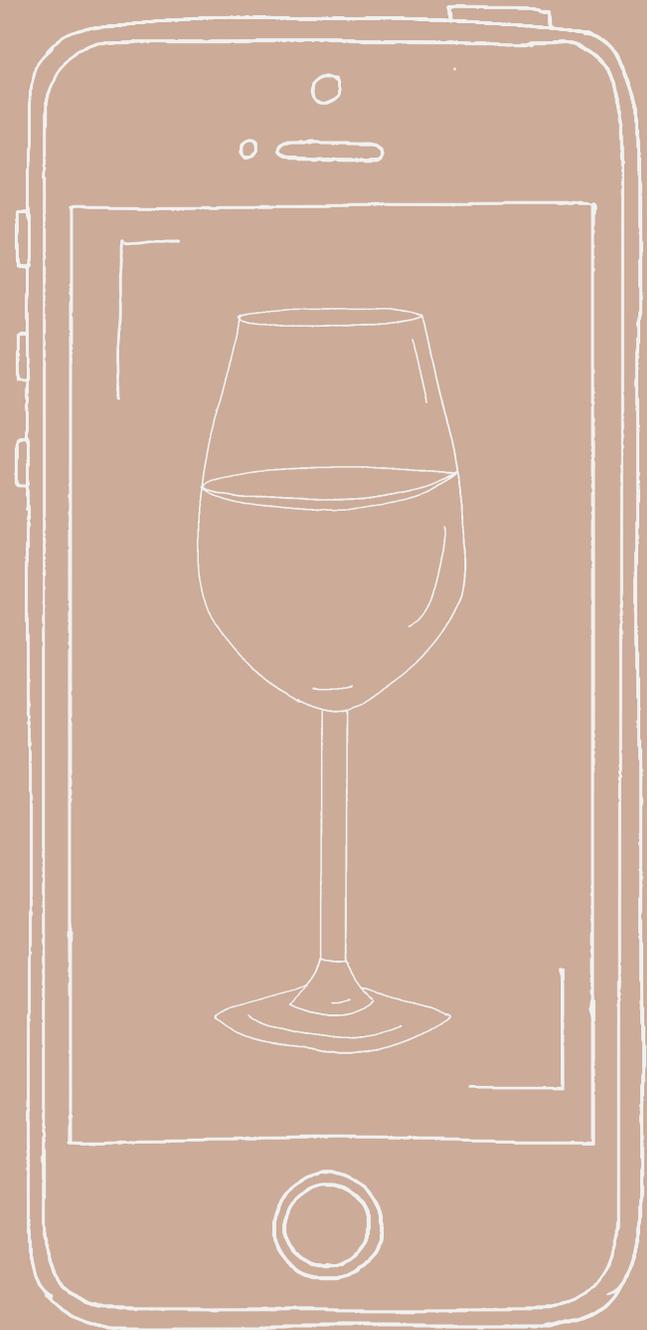
Messaging is the part of branding that has to do with language. It is the strategic formulation of a company's language, tailored to evoke the right feelings in the desired audience. Like a good visual identity, messaging guidelines ensure that marketing efforts are consistent across mediums, and efficiently working to communicate the same feelings and information so that the public has a clear understanding and feelings about what sets the brand apart.

The Third Thing:

The Future is Here. Where Are You?

The word on the street is that Millennials aren't drinking wine like they should. Yet millennials are still on pace to overtake both Boomers and Gen-X in the next 7 years. So why are so many wineries operating without a plan for how to target them? What's your plan?

Est. reading time: 2:35



3

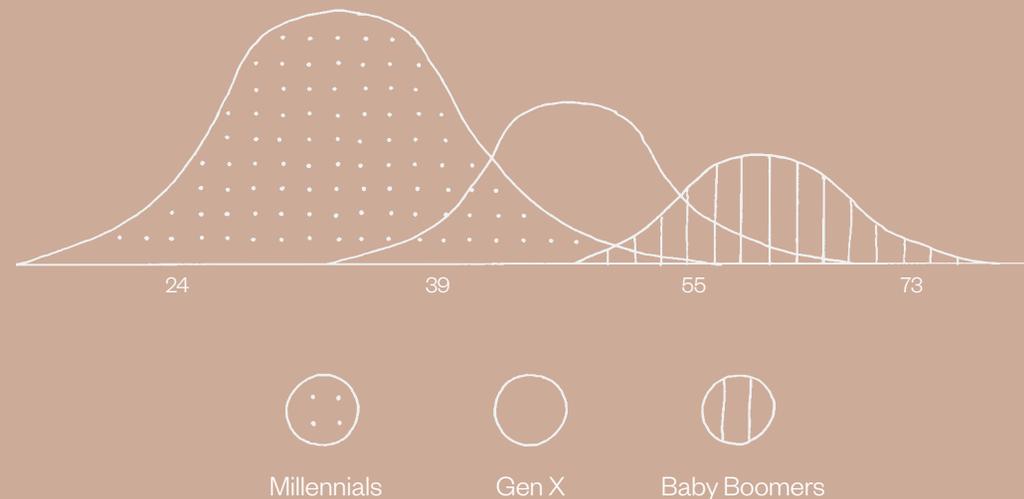
In our discussions with wineries we often hear: “Millenials don’t buy our wine, so we don’t market to them.” On its face this might make sense, but it’s actually the inverse of the truth: *If you don’t market to millennials, they won’t buy your wine.*

Most wineries’ customer base is weighted heavily towards Boomers and Gen-X. For today, this is fine, as these demographics buy the most wine. But what about in the coming years? The simple fact is that wineries need to sell wine to Millennials if they want to thrive, and many are sorely equipped to do so.

What makes Millennials different?

With regards to wine, Millennials have different priorities and values than previous generations. We know they are adventurous, and are [substantially more willing to try unique varietals than their parents](#). They are voracious self-educators, and give less credence to ratings and scores, instead favoring recommendations sourced through friends

% Total Wine Sales by Age



As Baby Boomers age out, Millennials’ wine consumption will continue to occupy a larger and larger share of the market. The Silicon Valley Bank Wine Report estimates that Gen-X will take over total volume from Boomers in two years, and Millennials will take over just five years later.

and social media. [Organic, Biodynamic, and Natural](#) wines have skyrocketed in popularity, as well as sparkling styles and rosé. Alternative packaging types — such as screw-top bottles, boxed wine, and cans — no longer carry the stigma assigned to them by previous generations; to the contrary, they are now treated as increasingly valid methods of packaging.

Millennials also see design differently. In our experience, one of the biggest challenges for established wineries is adjusting their visual language to speak to the younger generation. The difference in age between Baby Boomers and Millennials can be up to 40 years, and the visual language that one generation grew up with is starkly different than that of the other. Simply put, what one may see as conveying quality and exclusivity to a maturing age demographic may convey boredom, tackiness, or seem cliché to the younger drinker. Even recently designed bottles and websites can fall into this trap if they haven't been created with an eye toward younger generations. Updating a visual identity can be emotionally uncomfortable and expensive, but there's a reason why successful brands make regular adjustments to remain relevant.

So how do we market to them?

Millennials are just as human any other generation, and underlying their idiosyncrasies is an appetite for unique,



photo by Kelsey Chance

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true stories about interesting people who take their craft seriously. Moreover, their involvement with — and passion for — brands they care about dwarfs that of previous generations. If they decide you are a brand worth investing in, they will amplify your message beyond what traditional advertising could ever accomplish.

The central trait of Millennials is not that they are upending this tradition or disrupting that industry (although they are leading some large-scale changes happening today), but that they *care*. They care about who made their wine, how it was made, and how that fits into their values. They want to hear the *why* behind the *what*, and to be given opportunities (e.g. social media, events, etc.) to participate with the brand and product. Talk to them. If you want to know what they're thinking, listen. You may find surprisingly engaged and informed wine drinkers who are ready to become die-hard fans of the right winery.

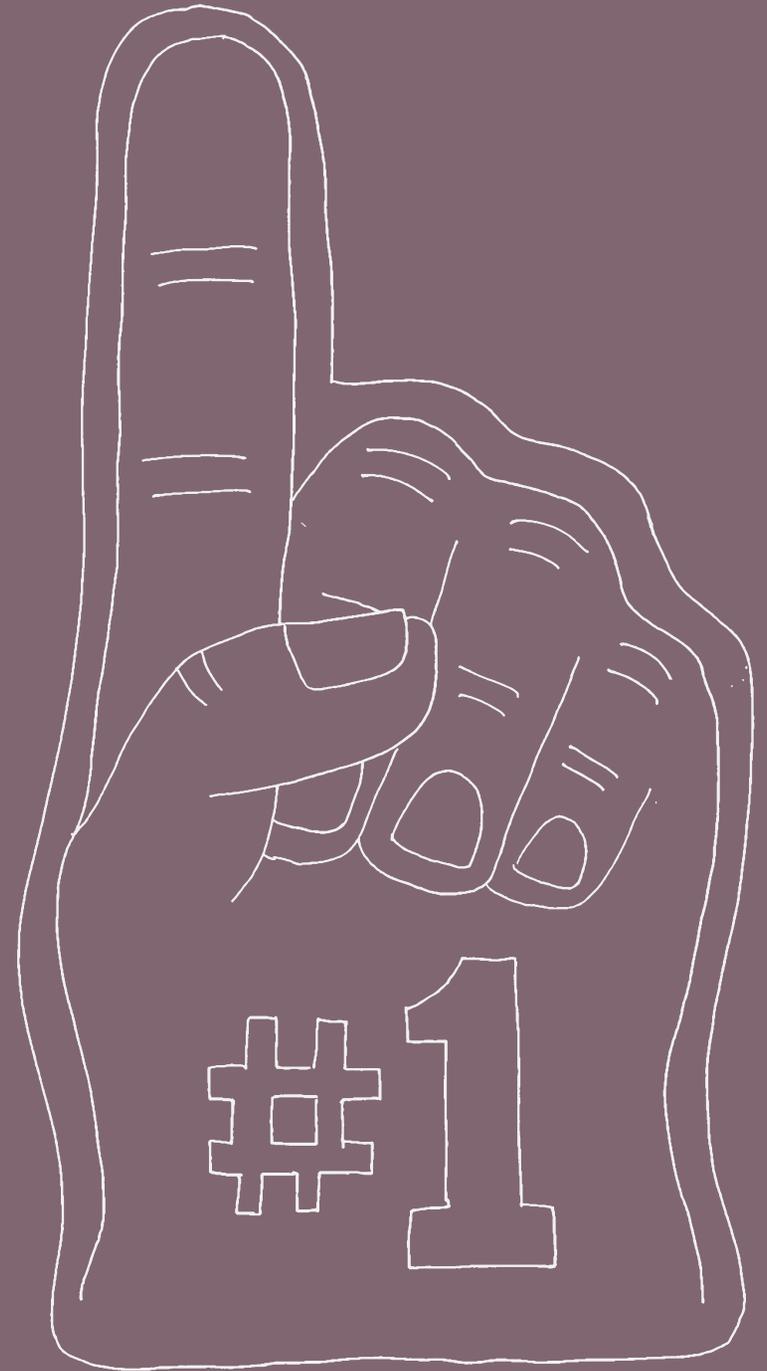
SOME QUESTIONS

- + What generation am I most comfortable speaking to? (Hint: it's most likely your own generation.)
- + What demographic do we want to reach the most?
- + What am I doing to ensure my marketing resonates with the people I'm trying to reach?

Make Fans, Not Just Customers

You probably already have a few dream customers. They buy every new release, they show up to every event, and they gush about your winery every chance they get. These fanatics help sustain and grow a business. How do we make more?

Est. Reading Time: 2:30



4

True fans are the best. The problem is, most wineries don't have enough — and they're unsure how to reliably create new ones. Even a dive bar cover band will stumble on a few groupies, but in order to fill a stadium (or even an exclusive, intimate club), you need to actively and purposefully cultivate new fans.

To do that, it helps to map out the pathway people take to fandom. We use the rubric “Traffic, Tasters, Fans” to help us categorize both present and potential customers. To create new fans, we must meet people at each stage along the way and help them move to the next. Let's have a look at each:

Traffic

When we talk about traffic, we are talking about people who haven't yet experienced your product. Converting them to tasters involves not just making them aware of you, but also clearing their path of obstacles. Making sure someone viewing your site on their phone can quickly find your



photo by Travis Gillett for Avennia

tasting room info, making sure your site is properly indexed in search engines, and making sure your bottles stand out on the shelf are some of the basic considerations that can help transform traffic into tasters. Much of what we think of as “marketing” falls under this category, largely because that’s the aim of many marketing efforts: getting people through the door.

Taster

A taster is someone who is having an experience with your product. It could be happening in your tasting room, at a restaurant, or in their home with friends. This is when all your hard work is paired with their preexisting impressions. We know that perception has a huge influence on taste (see Thing 1), so providing a positive expectation for this moment is critical to help shape that experience. Here is where traditional marketing approaches (e.g., price discounts) can fall flat, because while they may convert traffic into tasters, they don’t create the emotional conditions for a taster to become a fan. If, on the other hand, the taster is primed to experience your product in a positive and memorable way, they are much more likely to become a fan.

Fans

Fans are repeat customers who know what makes your wine special and tell that story to themselves and to others. They



Critically, while fans are your most secure customers, they still need to hear your brand's continued story, and they need to know how much you appreciate them.

tell it on social media, in reviews, and in person, and this in turn creates new traffic — people excited to become tasters, and possibly fans themselves. Critically, while fans are your most secure customers, they still need to hear your brand's continued story, and they need to know how much you appreciate them.

Using this rubric helps us focus on long-term relationships with customers, not just short-term ones. Everybody knows they need to convert people from traffic to tasters, but often wineries stop there and expect that the flavor of their wine alone will make them fans. Simple things like having an active and interesting mailing list¹ or customizing website experiences for returning customers can help cultivate that relationship. It's all well and good to get people in the door, but we need to be intentional about giving them reasons to return.

SOME QUESTIONS

- + What percentage of my customers are fans?
- + What am I doing to create more tasters?
- + What story and experience am I providing to help make taster into fans?
- + How do I consistently show my fans genuine appreciation?

¹ There are few things more futile than putting out a boring or ugly email. Take time to make your emails funny, fascinating, or provide some kind of offer to show you appreciate the reader's time.

The Last Thing:

The Power of Myth

Humans became the dominant species on planet Earth not because of their ability to make tools, but their ability to tell stories. It is this hard-wired instinct for myth that still shapes successful brands.



Est. Reading Time: 3:30

5

Our hunter-gatherer ancestors probably spent less time working than the average person alive today. Archaeologists who study contemporary hunter-gatherer societies find that they work on average [20-35 hours a week](#). The rest of their time is spent in community—relaxing, playing, and telling stories.

Archeologists believe that these stories enabled ancient homo sapiens to become the dominant species on the planet. Our siblings the Neanderthals were [stronger, heartier, and had better tool-making capabilities](#), but Homo Sapiens told stories to each other in a way that gathered and motivated much larger groups, leading them to eventual dominance in Northern Europe and the globe².

² Those interested in Homo Sapiens' relationship with our archaic siblings are recommended to read Yuval Noah Harari: *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London, Harvill Secker, 2014)

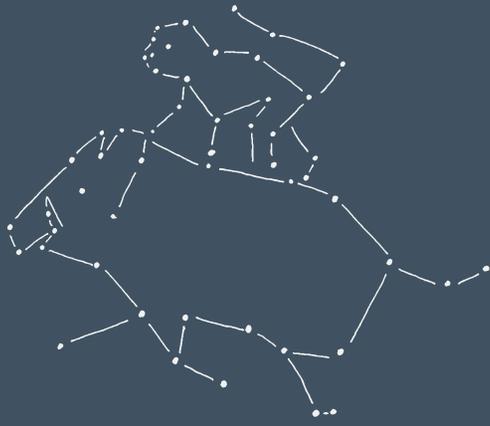
The capacity for not just communication, but shared imaginative storytelling, remains humankind's greatest innovation. After all, what good is knowing how to get to the moon if you can't motivate the people required to make it happen?

Successful brands understand humankind's innate capacity and desire for narrative, and so they weave a story — a myth — about their company that transcends simple facts, and instead resonates with people's emotions. Because these emotions lead people to desire this product more than others, the company can sell more or charge more for whatever it is they do or sell.

What is a Myth?

We may think of Greek gods or urban legends when we think of myths, but they don't have to be fictional³. A myth is any story that resonates with the listener in such a way that it inspires its own retelling. Myths contain themes of our deepest humanity (fear, love, hope, etc.), concentrated to increase their emotional potency. Sometimes myths are created organically, like historical events (e.g., [the first Thanksgiving](#)), but they can also be crafted to achieve a specific end (e.g., [Manifest Destiny](#)).

³ The Titanic is an example of a true myth - the story of the "unsinkable" ship going to the bottom on her maiden voyage resonates on deeply human themes of hubris, vanity, and class that is has achieved mythic status.



Just who's in charge here?

Most of us believe our thoughts determine our actions. However according to current brain research, it's actually our decisions that lead to thoughts.

This confounding concept has to do with the disparate parts of our brain. Our "thinking brain" is incredibly adept at logic and language, and serves as our internal narrator, and our "feeling brain" that governs things like emotion, learning, motivation, and memory. It's this part of the brain that seems to make the vast majority of our decisions, and does so based on these factors, leaving the thinking part of the brain to come up with a story as to why we did this or that.

It's not unlike a monkey perched on the back of a wild boar - the boar goes left, and the monkey thinks to itself "Yes! This is the best way to go." Sometimes, the monkey influences the boar, but usually the boar goes where it wants.

This helps explain why myths, with their emotional centers, are so powerful in branding: they're stories that speak directly to the boar.

How do we harness the power of myth in branding?

Good branding is effective because it generates experiences that create emotional memories. Because human decision making is highly dependent on emotions, these memories are much more likely to become the basis for action in the future.

When we work with branding clients, we always try to uncover the primary point of emotional resonance in their story. While developing our strategy for the [Kiona](#) website, we knew that the themes of family, humility, and home were central to the winery's identity, so we organized our messaging to tell the story of a family that followed a hunch and became remarkably unpretentious caretakers of one of the worlds' hottest AVAs. While there are many other elements that make up the whole of Kiona, we always returned to these simple, emotionally resonant themes to make sure that a visitor spending 30 seconds or 30 minutes on the site would remember the same story the next time they encountered a bottle.

Successful Stories

A brand story doesn't necessarily have to be a narrative. Nike's brand, for example, is based on the empowering nature of physical effort. Apple's iconic 'Think Different' campaign could be boiled down to "inspired people use inspiring computers". As long as it resonates emotionally, all

a brand story needs is to be simple enough that it's easy to remember, distinct enough that it doesn't get confused with others, and clear enough that it communicates the essence of the company.

Importantly, your story should be true. If your company wasn't really founded in 1914 it shouldn't claim to be, and if it doesn't actually care about the environment, it shouldn't pretend to. Transom believes that there is a niche for just about every company, and the narrower the niche the more passionate the fans. The groundswell of "natural" wines so popular with Millennials today is the product of winemakers who stayed true to their passion for alternative methods—and who are now reaping the rewards.

In the end, branding is about creating the right feelings about your company. When we create true, emotionally resonant brand stories, we're positioning our company for success by tapping into the very thing that makes us human.

SOME QUESTIONS:

- + What is my winery's brand story?
- + Am I able to encapsulate what makes us unique in a single sentence?
- + Can any of my competitors say something similar?
- + Does that sentence inspire deeply rooted emotions?

As long as it resonates emotionally, a brand story only needs three things: to be simple enough that it's easy to remember, distinct enough that it doesn't get confused with others, and clear enough that it communicates the essence of the company.

In Closing:

We wrote this book to spark thoughts and discussion about your brand, marketing efforts, and your relationship with your customers and the public. It is our hope that you find it useful — even if you disagree with our conclusions (and if you do, we'd love to hear your story and learn from your experience)!

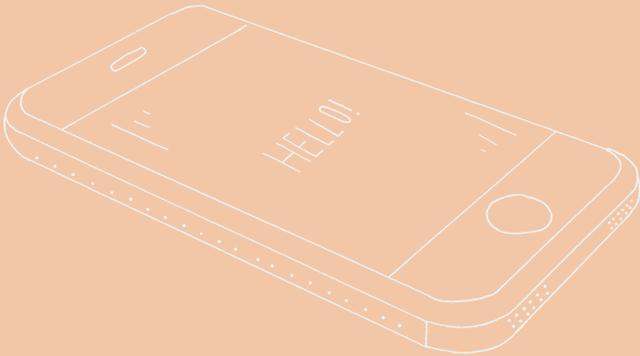
If you'd like to be kept up to date with what Transom is doing, including occasional writings about wineries, branding, and other ephemera, you can [join our email list](#) or follow us on [Twitter](#) or [Instagram](#).

If you have any questions about anything you've read, or if you'd like to connect with somebody to talk to about your own brand, website, or packaging, please don't hesitate to call or [email](#).

Thank you, and *santé!*



photo by Will Foster for Hedges Family Estate



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