

BITE-SIZE BRANDING

Find branding inspiration from across all industries to tantalize customers

By Andrea Syverson

You just never know where your out-of-the-office interests will take you! Recently, I have been paying more attention to the imaginative art of cooking and all that playfully surrounds it. I am not alone in this as it seems we've become a nation of foodies. There are new food networks (The Cooking Channel). More movies about food. (Last summer: Julie & Julia. This summer: Eat Pray Love.) New recipes abound (goodbye spaghetti and meatballs, hello bucatini all 'amatriciana with spicy smoky mozzarella). New ingredients (himalayan pink salt). New techniques (handheld food smoking guns). New cooking tools (from onion goggles to mango pitter/slicers). It's been seriously fun to take a field trip in this area.

Along the way, I even learned a new word that describes what sometimes happens when dining in fine restaurants and you are surprised by a food tidbit that is delivered to your table shortly after being seated. This is called an "amuse-bouche" and it is a French term meaning to "amuse your palate." Wikipedia expands on this a bit further: "Amuse-bouches are single, bite-sized hors d'oeuvres. They are different from appetizers in that they are not ordered from a menu by patrons, but when served, are done so according to the chef's selection alone. These, often accompanied by a complementing wine, are served as an excitement of taste buds both to prepare the guest for the meal and to offer a glimpse into the chef's approach to cooking."

Well, this idea took me right back into my branding brain and I started thinking about how creative brand leaders develop their own versions of "amuse-bouches" for their customers...not only at the beginning of their brand experiences but all the way throughout the process. Truly innovative brand leaders find all sorts of intriguing ways to offer their potential and present customers glimpses into their brands.

Retailers can be especially good at these bite-size branding techniques and may provide inspiration for your own business (whatever industry you are in - financial services, travel, pharmaceutical or publishing). So let's take a BrandAbout look at a few examples that these brand leaders cooked up:

The Walking Company

I recently ordered my first pair of shoes from The Walking Company. I was tickled when they arrived with a small cedar block tucked inside the shoe box to help keep my closet smelling fresh...imprinted, of course, with the company name. A small, useful, branded sensory surprise gift that will help me remember this company when it is time to make a shoe purchase again.

How can you gift your customers in some meaningful but unexpected way?

Beagle Books

Supporting local independent booksellers is a passion of mine and I always scout them out when I am traveling. While on vacation in northern Minnesota, I stopped at Beagle Books and bought several new hard covers. Upon unpacking my bag, I found tucked inside each book a bookmark that outlined in black and white 10 reasons why the retailer was grateful that I shopped with them. From “investing in entrepreneurship” (reason #9) to “taking advantage of their expertise” (reason #8), this little branding “afterwards” made me feel even better about my purchase. I appreciated being appreciated! **How does your brand express its gratitude?**

3FLOZ.com

Need your favorite personal items in mini-sizes for packing? This whole company was created to supply TSA friendly beauty products. Sort of an entire line of amuse-bouches! Its tagline is “For those who travel, those who are curious and those who can’t commit.” They will ship the products to you or even directly to your hotel, whichever makes your traveling easier. **Do you have tantalizing offers for your potential customers who might be a bit curious about your brand? Should you consider bite-size or trial products or services for those customers who are having trouble committing to you?**

Zappos

Have you seen the Zappos TV commercials based on customer service calls answered by the happy “Zappets”? Zappos is proud to be in the “amuse” business and practices its snippet-sized branding in many ways, including sharing its core values right on its boxes (Be passionate & determined!). It also uses its shipping boxes to announce other messages that customers may care about but be unaware of such as free overnight shipping on clothes. **Are all your branding containers (envelopes, boxes, labels, wrap, receipts) working hard to leverage your unique messages?**

Now, let’s look at what a few other industries do to entice their customers in not-so-big but memorable ways:

Publishing

Book groups have long been a dream for publishers – an active “net-promoter” community with built in connectivity among bibliophile passionistas. Long ago, the publishing world created a dessert version of amuse-bouches and included free “book group discussion guides” inserted in the back of key books. These tidbits about the author, questions about the plot or character and other related ideas are meant to provoke a deeper and richer reading experience. **What can your brand do to up its “conversation-worthiness” amongst its passionistas?**

One of my clients, Saint Mary’s Press, an educational curriculum publisher, takes this concept to the next level and offers its customers (teachers) a plethora of free online supplemental and complementary teaching resources. With budget cutbacks across most school districts, these relevant, customer-centric, on-brand tools set this company apart. They also allow customers to take a casual peek into products they might later want to purchase. **What value-added brand gifts can you give your customers a glimpse of?**

Packaged Goods

I love what the Almond Board recently did to encourage people of all ages to eat more almonds. They sell an attractive mini container on their website that holds just the recommended daily serving of almonds (23!). Yes, you could just grab a handful of almonds whenever you remember, but The Almond Board wanted to make it simpler for you to make this a healthy habit. By paying attention to the busy real lives of their customers and taking into account our mobile and busy society, they created this convenient little travel tin. Now you can easily take almonds to your home or office, gym or school. The Almond Board aligned their goal with their customers' desire to eat more mindfully. **Is your brand in align with your customers' goals? What are some small ways that you can make your brand more accessible for your customers?**

The screenshot shows the California Almonds website homepage. At the top left is the logo for "california almonds" with "Almond Board of California" underneath. To the right are four navigation tabs: "almond lifestyle", "health + nutrition", "recipe ideas", and "about almonds". The main content area features a large red banner for "ALMOND SNACK TINS" with the text "Choose from 3 stylish snack tins and start getting your snack on track every day." Below this banner are several smaller sections: "Summer Recipes", "Almond Snack Tins", "Gluten Free", "Pro-Snacker", and "Pantry Recipe Express". To the right of the banner is a "today's recipe" section for "Almond Dukkah" with a "more" button. Below the banner are four more sections: "almond tips" (Satisfy your sweet tooth...), "almonds + heart" (Discover the latest on almonds + heart health.), "perfect portion" (How to get your 23 a day.), and "eNews + recipe sign-up" (Get the latest on almonds.). At the bottom of the page, there is a footer with copyright information: "©2010 Almond Board of California. All rights reserved. | Privacy Policy/Terms of Use" and "About the Almond Board | In the News | eStore".

Travel and Hospitality

Holiday Inn Express is in the process of refreshing of their 3,296 worldwide hotel chain. This is how they describe it on their website: "You know what you want in a hotel. And you're the reason we're making big changes at every Holiday Inn Express worldwide. And while our new sign is the first thing you'll spot, the biggest changes are taking place on the inside. We're enhancing our room experience and improving our service standards across the globe. Sure, it may sound like a lot of work. But, we think you'll appreciate the effort." One of those "inside" changes is the huge floor mat you see upon entering the door. It says "We love having you here." This amuse-bouche-like brand message prepares the guests for the experience they are about to have. It sets the right tone. **Does your brand pay extra attention to its brand openings?**

So, as the head chef of your brand experience what amuse-bouches can you create to give your customers something that will whet their appetites for more? Pull your team together, roll up your sleeves and see what new recipes you can create from your very own brand ingredients. Think small. Think delightful. Think amusing. Think memorable! Bon appetit!

Andrea Syverson is the founder and president of IER Partners, which has guided and strengthened brands of all sizes with savvy best practices for creating customers for life. Combining her passion of adventurous listening and working across diverse industries, her “outsider-insider” creative branding and merchandising expertise and objectivity has been valued by companies as diverse as Ben & Jerry’s, Celestial Seasonings, CHEFS, Boston Proper, SmartPak, Spanx and World Vision. She holds an MBA and has dedicated more than 20 years to providing clients both domestic and international with innovative approaches to branding, product development and creative messaging. She is the author of two books in which she shares her hands-on approach for both brand building and creating customer-centric products that enhance brands: *ThinkAbout: 77 Creative Prompts for Innovators*, and *BrandAbout: A Seriously Playful Approach for Passionate Brand-Builders and Merchants*.