

**ASJA Teleseminar Series**  
**Publishing, Branding and Promotion**

**Robert Friedman on Branding**

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We're here with Robert Friedman, CEO and founder of Fearless Branding and FearlessBranding.com. Robert, we'd love to hear your background and how you got involved in branding.

I started my career in 1985, working at a big advertising agency in account management in New York City. I spent several years learning my craft and at one point I was hired by a client to take the position of Brand Manager, on a product by Kraft called the Budget Gourmet™. A brand manager is responsible for the positioning of a product and every aspect of product development including manufacturing, and finance. I did that kind of work for a number of years, and then I reached a point where I had a crisis of meaning around whether I should stay in this line of work—marketing, advertising, and brand management. I realized that I didn't need to become an academic, I simply needed to change my emphasis and my target clients.

Based on that realization, I started to think about how brands can connect deeply with the customers that are most interested in them, and branding can support not only good products and services, but provide truly meaningful experiences. And that is how I moved into the area of the work I do now. It was really a flash of inspiration.

*That's beautiful. I find myself curious about how you also made this segue from products, actual, tangible items, consumables, to services. Did it happen rapidly? What path did you follow?*

That really was fate. When I left global brand management for the Nestles and the Kraft's of the world, I really thought that what I would do was work for the little brothers and sisters of those kinds of companies. So, for example, of the many wonderful gourmet food products made by small companies in Northern California. However, what I found was that those types of companies do business entirely differently. They don't use the same kind of structure at all in terms of how a brand is positioned or how market research is done.

By happenstance, I got referrals to service professionals—for example, to a financial planning company and to a mortgage broker. Each time I worked with different services, and although the businesses were in different categories, I realized they were all providing extremely expensive services. For the most part, they each had this immediate need to be able to sit down with a client and explain what made them different—what made them special?

And why they would be a good fit with that particular client. The brand also needed to explain that if the company and client would be a good fit, how can we do some business together? And if we are not a good fit, then how do we determine that so we don't waste each other's time? Gradually over time, after doing six or eight of those types of engagements, I realized, that although these businesses were in very different categories, they were structured in very similar ways and had clients with similar needs.

*You've mentioned that you have a core philosophy around this, and a step-by-step process for branding. Do you want to address either of these points?*

One of the ideas that crystallized when I began defining my company was that, "Consumers love brands which fearlessly express their unique essence." That seemed to capture my philosophy and methodology. I had developed a practice of looking at the brands that I really admired—the brands that I thought were using the concept and the actuality of branding to its fullest potential. Some of those brands included Nike, Polo, Apple, Tiffany—Schwab, in the last couple of years, has also become another that I admire.

I started analyzing them, and I reverse engineered them. And the thing that I saw was that the way that they were 'fearlessly expressing their unique essence,' was basing their whole brand story on a single meaningful idea, an emotional idea, that was deeply relevant to one segment of the market.

It was a simple emotional idea, and they are not trying to be all things to all people. They pick their best client, or their best customer. So, let me give you a couple of examples: If you think about Apple, I would argue that their simple idea is creative. And if you, as a user of personal technology products, have a deep need to feel truly creative when you are using those technology products, like computers or music players that we used to call MP3 players, but now nobody would call them anything but an iPod—or if at a deeply emotional level you really want to be creative, you are so much more likely to choose an Apple product than you are to choose one of their competitors, let's say a Lenovo.

And it is that value that drives brand preference, that drives premium pricing, that drives the way a company chooses to design their products. The point that I want to make is that a huge portion of the value of these brands lies in this simple idea—whatever the idea is for that particular business. If you look at Polo/Ralph Laurence, I would say their idea is aristocrat. I've heard Polo described as a "lifestyle brand." Everything is a lifestyle brand and everyone has a lifestyle, but the question is, in my opinion, what lifestyle?

And that brings up a key distinction in the methodology, which is, it's got to be meaningful, but it has to reflect a specific meaning—a specific emotion as opposed to something general, like "lifestyle." If you look at the imagery that Polo projects, year in, year out, a consistent aspect of that image is an aristocratic lifestyle. As a customer, you may resonate with that, and you may not, but if you resonate with that image, it becomes one of your top choices for a brand that delivers that emotional benefit.

*Based on this kind of insight, do you want to talk about the qualities that you believe are always at play in a really good brand.*

**Branding for writers**—Our listeners may be saying, “This is all very well and good, but it might be abstract.” If somebody is a consultant, or is a writer, how does this apply to them? And the point that I want to make is that the thinking is the same. If you are a writer or you have your own business, the point is, if you can align yourself with a simple, meaningful idea that is deeply resonant to your ideal clients, it will help you market and sell your product, your service, your writing, whatever it may be. It will help you connect to the people and it will help you explain the value of what you offer. So, I just wanted to make that point, that this kind of thinking is available to all of us, even if we are not a multi-billion dollar global brand.

*Tell us more about the process that you use to explore genuine differentiation, because in the bit of work that we did together, what I saw is that you are not just looking for a cool image which someone wants to assume, but you are looking for an image which reflects what’s special, and differentiating about the service provider.*

That’s correct. And that ties back to the earlier question that you asked about the three key ways in which great brands are differentiated. Let me address that, because it’s not just about the idea. When I was doing my thinking about what makes these great brands great, and I thought, well, they all have this big idea, but supporting the emotional idea are two other levels of differentiation, and those two other levels are functional, and esthetic.

**Functional differentiation**—And functional simply means that you actually do something different. So, it can be something unique about your process or your method, if you are in a service business, something that’s unique about your product – it could be a feature, it could be the way it’s designed, but you actually have to do something different, and you are absolutely right, that big idea needs to connect with the actual way that you deliver your product or service.

**Aesthetic differentiation**—The third piece, esthetic, means that you take the emotional idea, you take the functional differentiation, and then you say, “How can I depict, or express, what is unique about my brand, using language and image, or visuals, that makes my brand look and sound different than the competition?” ***Not different for difference sake, but differentiated and connected to your core brand idea.***

*In terms of functional differentiation, it seems like it’s both differentiation and uniqueness, but also, excellence. In the book, Good to Great, the authors ask “What is it that you do better than anyone else in the whole world?” So, it seems like there must be a lot of clients where that’s part of what you are digging for when you identify what’s unique— where is their excellence?*

And the thing that I find is that often the excellence is in the differentiation. What may be excellent to one person may not be relevant to another. If you think about the Charles Schwab brand, “Talk to Chuck,” they’ve done a great job of differentiating themselves versus other financial services companies. “Talk to Chuck.” It’s a very casual, approachable, regular guy brand. And Merrill Lynch, Bank America, etcetera, etcetera, Wells Fargo – nobody else is owning that space. So, going back to your point around, well what are they excellent at? They

are not saying, in their marketing, that we'll get you the highest returns, that we're the most sophisticated investors, but they are saying, basically, that "We will treat you fairly. We won't nickel and dime you. We will put your interests first."

So, in looking at the way that you do whatever you do, the point that I want to make is that customers (and your readers can be defined as customers)—customers can be segmented, and each segment values something that's different. So, it's really about aligning how you do what you do and finding that group of people that are going to really value what you do and what makes you unique. It's about matching those two things up.

*A question that sort of pairs with that, that comes up for me is, when we think about a new business, a start up, or a new brand, a new identity for an existing business, part of what we are thinking about, in a way, is manifesting. So, you mentioned that you work with emotion, function, and image. Does the image become the embodiment of what's unique or special about that service... for example, us as writers If somebody is a journalist, where do they really shine? What do they do that hardly anybody else does? Is this somebody that has been to caves five miles under the earth, or on Antarctica... The bottom line is, does the image, the esthetics, try to gel that concept of uniqueness and differentiation?*

The way I look at it is that it is kind of like a progressive feedback loop where, once you have a starting place, that the image should reflect what the idea is, but then, when you know what your language is and you know the visual that you want to communicate, it's not only reinforcing your idea, but it's creating your idea.

So, the more Schwab says, "Talk to Chuck," the more you think of them as, "Oh yeah, they're the regular guys. They're the really approachable ones." So, it becomes something that feeds on itself. I'm going to give you a quick example. One of the brands that I use as a case study and an example frequently is Tiffany. Obviously, they are known for that very distinctive robin's egg blue color in their marketing, and their box. And they have done such a good job ... it's almost Pavlovian, the way that someone who is in their target audience will almost take a little breath, like a gasp, around the idea of getting a really great gift in that Tiffany box. At the end of the day, all it really is, is a cardboard box, right? They have done a masterful job of imbuing that box and creating meaning in it, but it's a symbol. Like, in the case of a writer, if you have a book jacket, you can create symbols and you can create the meaning that you want to establish for yourself as an author, as an author brand, or it could be the book title itself, as an example. And you can do what Tiffany has done and say, what is the primary meaning that I am trying to communicate here? In the case of Tiffany, it's romance.

So in your branding process, you want to ask yourself, How can I create that link between the emotional reaction of the customer, with the symbol, with what am I actually trying to provide here?

*I see in the other writing and interviews that you've done, that you also focus on archetype. How does that tie in with the uniqueness, and the imagery, and is this something that people grasp right away?*

I use archetype as a way to get at what the emotional idea might be for a client. In short, archetype is a concept that was coined by Carl Jung, who was one of the pioneers of modern psychology, and he believed in this concept of the collective unconscious, that there are these psychological forms that humans understand regardless of where in the world they may be. So, probably the easiest way to explain what an archetype is, is to give some examples. So, the Earth Mother. The Warrior. For modern humanity, The Scholar. The Mad Scientist.

One of the key aspects of archetypes is that they need no explanation. We just know what it is. So, from the perspective of a brand, when you can align your brand with a single archetype, what that means is that the people who are receiving your message understand who you are at a very elemental level, without thinking about it a lot. And the more you can communicate with them at that level, the more efficient your communication can be. And the clearer your communication can be, on a consistent basis. So, if you can align your brand with an archetype, and you know that is what drives everything you say and do in terms of your brand, and your business, then you don't have to run the risk of being one thing on Monday and something different on Tuesday, which could confuse your audience.

Martha Stewart is a great example of someone with a personal brand who really embodies a specific archetype, and I would say that archetype is the Roman goddess, Vesta, Goddess of the Hearth and Home. It's one reason that I think Martha Stewart, despite being a felon, has been able to retain her brand and resume her career. She is continuing to deliver her brand promises around domestic goddess, and some of her ethical lapses, they've been more of a blip on the radar, and I think the reason that that is the case is because they didn't fundamentally interfere with her ability to deliver her brand promises.

*She has chosen just the right image, and it is such a broad umbrella. I mean, when you think about the whole range of publishing and products and web copy, and how far her reach is, and the terrific variety of endeavors where she is involved, they all fall under that one umbrella concept.*

In the branding world what you are referring to is something called brand architecture. And one of the issues that brand architecture helps with is, how many different businesses can my brand stretch into? Like you just talked about how naturally Martha Stewart can go from magazines to television to books to... and it goes effortlessly because she continues to deliver the same primary emotional brand message, and the same is true for Apple. They have introduced these multi-billion dollar products that are not new brands, they are just brand extensions. iPods, iPhones, they all fit under the Apple brand.

Whereas, on the other side of the spectrum, you've got Proctor and Gamble – and I want to say, neither is right nor wrong, it's just a question of what's going to serve – but if you look at Proctor and Gamble, and they've got Scope, and Tide, and Pampers, and each one of those is a totally separate brand. Often I get asked, "I have a couple of different businesses that do a few different things. Do I need multiple brands?" And I would answer it by saying, if you can deliver the same fundamental benefit to the customer in a variety of services that you may provide, then you probably don't need another brand. You probably can fit everything under one brand. But if

that primary benefit is not there, then your communication becomes harder and you probably do need another brand.

*With your example, what comes up for me is that maybe part of why Proctor and Gamble needed to do that is that their company name, while it stands for integrity and sort of active, consumer-oriented corporate... they don't really have a strong brand identity for P & G, the way Martha Stewart, say, does.*

That is correct. I totally agree. It's not there. Even if you tried to articulate what it was, it doesn't hit you in the heart or hit you in the gut like, "Oh, I totally understand who they are and what they stand for."

They have integrity, but they don't have that core identity.

One of the things that I do want to say about branding, again that comes up very frequently is, What makes a good emotional brand idea? And what makes a not good emotional brand idea? And one of the key drivers is how specific it is. Often, someone would say, "Our emotional idea is 'trustworthy'." Or, "Our emotional idea is 'quality'." Or, "Our emotional idea is, 'integrity'." And I really caution people from building their brands on ideas like that, because they are so necessary that they become almost unimportant. It's certainly not differentiating. One filter that you can apply is, if you say, "Our brand is built on integrity," if you can make the statement, "Well, I would hope so," then you probably have an idea that would be too generic. Versus, as a technology company, Apple might say, "Our business is built on creativity," and then you could say, "Well, can all of your competitors hope to say the same thing?" And the answer would be no. They are not all positioned in the same way.

*From this foundation, do you want to talk about how you go about branding a client who offers services? And how might a writer or a journalist start to think about the branding process?*

I believe that the branding process has three primary steps. I think this is really pretty standard. You want to look inward and ask yourself the big philosophical questions,

- \* Who am I?
- \* What's the fundamental difference I want to make in the world?
- \* What are the values that I live as I do my work?
- \* What are the fundamental promises that I make to whomever it is that I am serving?"

It could be readers, it could be clients, but you want to ask those kinds of questions. Then you want to look at the people in your target market. So, it could be your existing clients if you have been in business for awhile, it could be prospects. It could also be useful in understanding your competition. And what you want to do is understand their overall needs. So, that would be like the category of need.

Then you want to dig down and say, “How can I understand who these people are so that I can begin to segment the market, so that I can appeal specifically to a segment that is neither going to be too big, nor too small.” It’s too small if I can’t build a business around it, and it’s too big if the people won’t be similar enough to each other.

***Demographics and psychographics***—There are two primary ways that you can think about your target segment. One is demographically, and another is psychographically.

Demographically, I think we are all pretty familiar with what a demographic is. It’s just, how old you are, how much money you make, what kind of education you have, where you live, what zip code, how many kids you have, all those very tangible ways to define a person.

Psychographically I think is really important in the publishing world. It’s how somebody thinks or feels, or what they might need on a more emotional level. And I really believe very, very strongly, in having conversations. There are so many tools that you can use to do surveys and secondary research on the internet, but what I find is that... Just, kind of like the conversation that you and I are having, if you can have a conversation, that can reveal really useful information. I actually often like to do it on the phone – for twenty minutes or half an hour or forty minutes, with somebody who really uses whatever it is that you provide, and you get a chance to understand their experience using your services.

***Gaining a deeper understanding of the client’s experience***—And you really understand from beginning to end, “Why did you think you needed that?” or, why did you want that? What made you decide you were going to... whatever it might be... buy that book by that author? Why did you subscribe to the New York Times? Why did you cancel that subscription? And go all the way from need, through the entire usage experience, to what the client or the reader got at the end of the experience.

I think it’s really important to have conversations, and you don’t have to have tons and tons of them. But, a dozen of them go a really long way.

***Looking at the competition and defining your niche***—The third piece of how I look at defining a brand... So, we talked about looking inward and we talked about looking at the user, and then the third piece is we want to look at the competition and we want to understand how this category is defined.

- \* What are the choices in the category?
- \* How are they positioned?
- \* What are they saying about each other?

And in looking at those three aspects, we can often figure out what the simple brand idea is. A lot of times it is a feeling that somebody wants more of.

*If we thought in terms of examples, do specific authors, or even titles, book titles, come to mind, where you could kind of walk us through either what you know happened, or it could be a hypothetical.*

Let me do my best. One book that comes to mind is a book called *The Four Hour Work Week*, by Tim Ferris.

That's been a really successful book. And when you look at it, it appeals to an emotional need of a particular segment of the market. It's appealing to, most likely, a moderately- to well-educated person is probably a knowledge worker, but who is probably unfulfilled, and who is probably someone who would... You know, remember that song, "Take this Job and Shove It"? It's very much focused on that emotional need, like, "I don't want to do this." And winning at life is based on the number of umbrellas that are stacking up underneath my lounge chair on the beach. You know, the number of tropical drink umbrellas. And basically the premise of the book, is that you can develop a product, it might be a product that already exists, and then your job is to develop distribution and marketing systems, and then you put those things on autopilot, and that's where the four-hour work week comes in. It's that once the product has been developed, and your marketing and distribution and financial systems are developed, then basically you just get to sit on the beach and you do the whole thing remotely for four hours a week. And they are either automated or they are outsourced. That's the functional premise here, he is saying you can automate and outsource that work, and the emotional benefit is your freedom, regaining your time, because you only have to work for four hours a week.

*He is really cleverly, both in his own personification and even in the book title and branding, There's a little palm tree, like an island with a palm tree right on the cover. Somehow he has managed to really get multiple layers going, of meaning, and that is creativity, a certain intensity and immersion. If you really apply yourself you can come up with this creative product, the creative system, and then everything else follows, so he is also kind of appealing to right brain, nonconformist, creative types.*

**A walk in the customer's shoes**—I think there's two different experiences, and this is true for any brand... and I'll point out that this actually mirrors a piece of the branding process that I use, so I'll talk about the process a little bit more explicitly, I call it a walk in the customer's shoes.

**1) What do they need?** Before they even have heard of your solution, or seen your solution.

**2) Give them a quick taste of your solution.** So, that might be, somebody is walking into a bookstore and they see the book cover on a table in the front of the bookstore, or they go to Amazon and they are browsing and they just see that book jacket.

**3) The third level is that they actually read your book or use your product.** They actually have the experience.

So looking at this example on the solution level—and the quick take—I see Four Hour Work Week, and I see palm trees. "Oh, that sounds good! I am tired. I do not want to keep this job. That palm tree looks really nice," and that's about as far as it gets at that second level, but he's

made a powerful emotional connection. I'm saying he, the author, but the publisher, of course, had a lot to do with the development of the jacket and the way the book is marketed, but it's making a powerful emotional connection with the reader, who has a really deep emotional need going into the whole situation.

And then, when they read the book, they find, as you pointed out, that oh, there's more to it, there can be creativity, and I am going to have to bring all of myself into this, and it might work for me or it might not work for me based on my ability to really apply myself, etcetera, etcetera, but at that fundamental brand level there is something very escapist about it.

*You've got a really good point. So on that immediate level, which is what sells books, sort of the core message, more than creativity, the core message is escapism, as you mentioned. So, it could be a guy in a cubical who could be anywhere in the spectrum of creativity, but if he's got that desire to jump ship...*

I think that's who they want to buy that book. It's that guy in the cubical who says, "Man, I know how to use the internet. I can find a virtual assistant who could work for 20 hours a week while I'm hanging out drinking pina coladas. Sounds good."

*Tell us more about how you work specifically, with clients.*

**Brand vision**—I work with clients in two different ways. The fundamental process that I use is called brand vision. And I've already described that process. It's a deep dive into looking at what really defines your unique value. And it covers the areas that we've talked about. It's at an emotional level, and at a functional level, and it really helps us to define what are you promising to your ideal customers. And how do you define your ideal customers or your ideal readers so that we can connect your unique value with those people who want it most. So, there is the deep dive into who you are, there's the deep dive into who those customers are, and there is the looking at the competition. And I either do all of that work for my clients, or with certain clients, typically when they are individual service professionals, consultants, writers, etcetera,

**Brand coaching**—I also have a process that I call brand coaching, which is really a hybrid of coaching and brand consulting, where I support the client in doing some of that work for him or herself, but at the end of the day, the process gets done so you have the clarity and you know what your value is. Then we take it to the next step, which is how we translate the definition of your value into the messages that you can use to market and sell what you are providing.

*You also seem pretty high visual to me. I love your website, which is FearlessBranding.com, right? So, do you also help clients in terms of imagery that embodies their brand?*

Yes I do. I will partner with graphic designers and art directors to help them to tell their story visually if that's what they need.

*One question would be, are there other books that you would like to talk about? Or authors? For example, today I just found myself thinking a lot about The Tipping Point, and also another book that I have here, called Made to Stick.*

Both of those are actually germane in two ways. I think that both are good book brands, and they are really relevant for people who are thinking about, “How do I build my brand?” *The Tipping Point*, specifically, Malcolm Gladwell as an author brand. We talked about this about a month ago when we had a joint meeting with publicists and writers and authors. Malcolm Gladwell as a brand I think is all about deep curiosity and a way of exploring and then explaining how things become the way they are. I think Malcolm Gladwell in *The Tipping Point* was really interested in exploring how trends start, how in particular epidemics, and even ideas spread. And that’s really what we want when we are developing a brand, we want something that’s going to spread. And I think that *Made to Stick* has kind of a similar approach. It’s another way of looking at a similar question, which is, what makes something sticky (memorable). So, I think that they are good book brands because they are appealing to something that is so simple, and that we are deeply curious about.

And I think, in both cases, I think what you are saying is that they have both done a good job of what I call the esthetics. What I see in branding, a pitfall is that people jump straight to the esthetics. So, how do we make this look cool? As opposed to, how do we communicate a specific idea? And I think what you are saying, Nancy, is that both of those books – like ‘em, don’t like ‘em - are using the esthetic tools to communicate what their idea really is, so we get it. You know, like that matchstick, whoa, what makes a blazing forest fire that kind of takes over? I think that’s what he is trying to talk about in [The Tipping Point](#).

*I find myself wondering, ultimately, how an author really brands themselves. Is there anybody that you have kind of followed over time and sort of formed an opinion on?*

I encourage people to use that same process. What is that deep emotional value that you provide that helps you to connect with a particular type of reader or client that needs something. You can look at authors as different from each other as, let’s say, Wayne Dyer and Danielle Steele, but I think what they have in common is how consistent they are in what they write. I’m not really a Danielle Steele reader, but when it comes to romantic fantasy, I believe she is just widely acknowledged to be kind of the queen of that genre, and Wayne Dyer writes a lot about his personal interest in kind of human development as it connects to the spiritual, and he’s on a quest to understand, and his books are really quite similar to each other, and you just kind of get to track along with him as he is trying to figure out what makes the human soul more satisfied.

There was one other one that we talked about earlier, or that we started talking about earlier, Elkhart Tolle and the *Power of Now* and *The New Earth*, and I think he has tapped into something that is almost an antidote. *The Power of Now*, there is a simplicity in what you have at this moment, and all of the external trappings that we spend... that many of us spend the vast majority of our energy trying ensure that are in place. That those things aren’t really what life really is, and what really is—is just now—whatever it happens to be. Again, I think it has been so successful because he has been able to tap into – and this really brings the conversation full circle – to the power of a simple emotional idea that is specific and deeply meaningful to a particular segment of the population. He has just mastered it, and I think that’s what a great brand does.

*I looked The New Earth up on Wiki, and also talked to a gal who manages a New Age bookstore here in the City, and that book really took off after Oprah used it in her book of the month club, and then did a series of teleseminars on different chapters. And on the third phone seminar in that series there were eleven million people on the line. Big call. And so, in terms of his identity, he kind of morphed a bit of her identity onto his, so the audience grew exponentially.*

Eleven million people! Clearly, he struck a chord. And what is it that struck a chord in Oprah plus eleven million other people? And I think where I would like to end is that we all have that capacity and that ability to develop a singular idea like that, that will strike a chord. It is in the power of the simple idea that we are able to reach people.

Many of us are used to thinking of branding, associated with marketing—and in a way, we’re used to thinking of marketing as something slick, a kind of spin power. But the message you are giving is really the total opposite, that what you are looking for is real value on the deepest level, and then communicating that value.

That is very true. In fact, one of the things that I often will point out explicitly is that branding and marketing are not the same thing. One of the ways I define branding is often just your central organizing principle. Like your core essence, the core philosophy. If it’s authentic, then your marketing simply expresses that. I really do think that it is about value, it’s not about slickness. It’s about finding that connection to what is deeply meaningful to you and your ability to consciously shape perception of your product or service based on that big idea, that simple idea, that is relevant to you, that you are going to be sharing with your audience. When you can reach eleven million people who resonate with a particular idea, and a particular approach (to anything), who respond, “That’s cool. That resonates with me.” There is something very helpful about this realization, because any of us can do that.