



Been there, sold the T-shirt

Building a brand

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You might be an amazing photographer, but does your branding represent you well? Three photographers from different genres reveal all about their effective, and sometimes quirky, brands

Branding isn't just about a logo, it's much, much more. You can try and avoid it, but in the modern day everyone is expected to have a website and a social media presence, and if you don't, it's all shock horror. Online platforms not only provide a perfect place for sharing work, they also allow you to put a message across to an audience, in business terms that means showcasing your brand, work and selling products.

San Diego-based music photographer, Adam Elmakias started shooting concerts from the age of 16 as a way to get into them for free. Ten years later and he's a big name in the music industry

amongst bands, music fans and even other photographers. His social media stats of 87.5k Twitter followers, 466.8k Instagram followers, 123.5k Facebook likes and even more on other social platforms are definitely something to brag about, not forgetting his portfolio of shots that ranges from the likes of Metallica to Justin Bieber. So where did his big break come from, is there a key recipe for growing your following?

"There weren't really any big jumps, it's been slow and steady for ten years now," Adam tells us. "Social media is definitely a good outlet and a way to get in. If you're starting out it's so much easier to take a good photo and be able to show people." ▶

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In terms of growth it might not be something you can really measure, but it will happen. Adam’s following has grown over time, which reinforces the need to keep at it, while not giving yourself a hard time for having just a couple of hundred followers.

“Sometimes it goes up, sometimes it goes down. At the moment it’s not as popular as it was a year ago in the social spectrum, but that’s how, quote unquote, celebrity as in being an object, how that life works, it goes up and down,” he says.

Building a brand online means you need to invest time in your online activity. This has to be one of the biggest challenges for busy photographers who would rather be out shooting images than huddled over a keyboard, blogging into the wee small hours. Adam found that initially he spent a lot of time online, and suggests that people wanting to build a brand need to do the same, but not to the point that it becomes all-consuming. “I guess my view has changed on how much time I spend,” he tells us. “When I was younger, I definitely used the Internet a lot and it helped me to get where I am, but at the same time I didn’t want it to become all I did. It should happen effortlessly, but it shouldn’t be what you focus on every day as it can become counterproductive.”

Interacting with your audience is key. Think about the last time you tweeted a brand, celebrity or someone whose work you were fond of. If they didn’t respond, were you disappointed? And if they did reply, like or retweet your post how did that make you feel? We all like a bit of acknowledgement and appreciation every now and then, and your audience is just the same.

“Of course interaction is important, but I can’t respond to everyone otherwise I’d go crazy. When I started with Myspace in the early days I just started talking to people and word of mouth was really good. Now I have someone who works for me and responds to all of my Facebook messages and emails, because we get a lot. Unfortunately I just don’t have the time to respond to everyone, if I happen to



ABOVE: All Time Low are one of Adam’s regular clients. This shot of frontman and guitarist Alex, was taken at a show in Los Angeles CA.

BELOW: Adam’s branding is consistent throughout his online presence, which includes his website, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram



ADAM ELMAKIAS

be on the computer at the time then I’ll respond,” Adam confesses.

When it comes to posting content online you need to consider what type of content you want to post. Rather than just uploading a photo, try writing a blog and share it across your social channels. You also need to ensure that the content you are posting reflects your brand. Timing is another important factor, consider when your audience is most likely to be active online. For a music photographer this might be just after a gig has finished, otherwise between 5:30 and 6:30pm when people are commuting from work, or even at lunchtime or weekends. You also need to consider how often you post. ▶



CASE STUDY - ELSPETH VAN DER HOLE



My photography predominantly covers fashion and beauty, both editorial and commercial.

Originally I kept myself completely separate from my

work; and then I decided to test the market by gradually introducing my face and personality into my brand. People began to be much more receptive to my work once they could see the person behind it. Eventually myself and my work drew level and even The Prince’s Trust, who I secured a business loan with after completing their Enterprise course, identified me as ‘my own brand’ when I was setting up my business.

My research into branding wasn’t really conventional, as it was more of a social experiment – seeing how my target market reacted when I made the business more personal.

When it comes to ensuring that my branding covers all fields of my work – well, as I am my brand, then I make sure that it is personal, emotional when it seems necessary and a healthy balance of my talent and what makes my business tick, me!

In terms of my logo I didn’t have a graphic designer – originally I got sick of using stereotypical fonts to

watermark my images and simply scribbled my signature on the corner of any online images to stop them from being stolen. To my surprise people repeatedly asked me what font I was using and it seemed to be a hit so I stuck with it!

It has developed over a number of years, from carefully drawn out designs to playing with already existing fonts. However I have ended up with something so simple and unique that it just works. I guess as I am my brand it makes sense for it to be my handwriting, and expressing more of myself within my work!

From my point of view you need to decide whether you will be your brand, or whether your work will be your brand. It’s incredibly important to differentiate between the two.

I have been selling prints for some time and took the next step into more practical, everyday merchandise, so creating phone cases just seemed like a natural progression. I originally sold just images of my work on the cases, but after several requests I have released some with my logo on too, also personalising some in my handwriting/similar style to logo. Next in the pipeline is to look into a clothing line – T-shirts, leggings etc. So watch this space!

elspethvanderhole.com



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CASE STUDY - STEVE GERRARD



I shoot bands, portraits and weddings. That may sound varied but it's all about capturing people and being as creative with that as possible. Shooting a groom and his groomsmen isn't that different to shooting portraits of a band.

When it came to branding I wanted something that wasn't too 'wedding-y'. My wedding clients tend to be people who are looking for something different. They're often big music fans too. I didn't want my music clients to be put off when they see that I shoot weddings as well. I wanted something a little edgier, modern and, if I'm honest, a bit cooler.

Myself and my partner Evelyne make up the team for our wedding photography, and we did tonnes of research! We started a Pinterest board and added loads of artwork, concert posters, branding, fonts and colour schemes. Once we had enough we began scaling it back to something that would give our designer a good idea of what we had in mind. We wanted something that was immediately striking and different from anything we'd seen on other photographers' websites.

I really think that branding should not just be about your logo. It should cover everything from the design of your stationery to the clothes you wear

and the way you write on your blog. It's about projecting the personality of the photographer. I think our brand tells clients that we're modern, creative, not too serious, a bit different and incorporates that rock 'n' roll side of what we shoot. We wanted to deliberately put off certain clients. Not everyone will like our branding just like not everyone will like our images. And that's perfectly fine. I'm actively looking for clients who love what we do and the way in which we do it. Our branding is a major part of filtering out those clients who are not on the same page and attracting those that are.

We used the amazing people at Modern Dog in Seattle for our logo. We spent more than we anticipated (about £3000) but I'm glad we did. We went back and forth quite a bit over a couple of months, including two or three Skype conversations, after which they presented a few options for logos etc. Once we chose one, they went back and refined it until we agreed on the finished design.

Don't be afraid to be yourself and brand for your own personality. Don't be scared of putting off clients, they probably weren't your clients really anyway. Imagine your ideal client browsing through 50 photographers' websites and ask yourself how yours will hold their attention longer than other photographers' websites.

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"Don't post about a subject ten times a day, post about it every two days or so, just to help remind people," Adam says.

It's important to keep people up to date with your work, but at the same time you don't want to annoy them by filling their feed with repetitive content.

"It just needs to be organic and fun. It shouldn't be a task every day to maintain," Adam adds.

So how do you come up with a successful brand? There are companies dedicated to helping people create branding for their business, but what about doing it for yourself. Adam has an interesting view: "You don't really have to come up with it, because it's just you. Branding done wrong is thinking about what you want to do with it and branding done right is thinking about yourself and what you want to focus on," he says.

"For me it's more figuring out what I like and want to show people and then focusing on it. So, I have a cool cat, I'm bald and I really enjoy healthy food - these are all things that I enjoy and want to share," Adam adds.

Back in the early days of Adam's career he moved to San Diego and slept on his sister's floor. With very little money he designed business cards in the form of a lens bracelet and bought a bulk pack for \$100. He soon found that people wanted to buy the bracelets. "I went to a Warped tour and people came up asking to buy them, it was crazy," he recalls.

While paid advertising may help, it's little things like Adam's bracelets that can have a big impact. While evidently not an online form of branding, they soon got picked up by Photojojo and created an online stir within the gadget industry. Websites started to feature them, which in turn helped to promote Adam's own website and work.

To this day Adam still uses the bracelets to his advantage: "I give out my bracelets at concerts I attend to the front row of kids. They all have my website on them so it's a cool way to connect with people," he says.

This bracelet serves as both a marketing tool and source of income, but they aren't Adam's only venture, he's got his own T-shirts, sells prints and has recently launched his own magazine showcasing his work, all in keeping with his branding.

"BRANDING DONE RIGHT IS THINKING ABOUT YOURSELF AND WHAT YOU WANT TO FOCUS ON"



© ADAM ELMAKIAS

The magazine, *Your Music Photographer* features a selection of Adam's images, as well as short handwritten captions detailing the show and artist, with comments about the image. Adam has really gone to town with the magazine; not only do fans receive it, they also get a selection of postcard printed photos, one of which promotes the release of the next issue; a thank you note; a selection of lens bracelets; and also a small alien figure. "People say I look like an alien because of my freakishly out of this world baldness,

so I incorporated that into my branding," Adam explains.

It's important to keep your branding consistent and a second opinion is always useful. "The magazine was and still is my favourite and most personal project. I love it because it's my work. The front cover and back cover are in line with my branding. I did have a few ideas that didn't get used; my girlfriend is good at giving me the honest, but sometimes hard to hear, truth. She has a design eye, I just take photos."

"The magazine was sent out to everybody who's in it that I know, I sent it to management and the publicists of the bands, as well as some of my friends. I probably sent out 150 in total, but that's marketing, the idea is that they put it on their coffee table and somebody sees it and they like it. Mostly I just want people to have it, but obviously it has other benefits," he says. "I now have something that I can create on my own that supports me and people enjoy it."

When it comes to creating your brand Adam suggests taking a fun approach: "Think of yourself as a cartoon character, identify five traits that you really want to focus on and every now and then post about them.

"The best thing I can say is you need to be you - not in a selfish way, but you need to figure out what you are and just do that. You don't have to change and you don't have to fit in with anything because then you'll progress in a direction that you won't enjoy. I think that the biggest thing with photography is you as a person."

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ABOVE: *Jeremy of A Day To Remember in Berlin*

LEFT AND BELOW: Adam's magazine allows him to showcase his work and branding in a profitable product

