

S2: E191: Why "Safe" Branding is the Greatest Risk to Your Movement

Hey there, and welcome back to the Make Your Message a Movement podcast. This is your host, Tiffany Neuman, and today we are talking about what it means to create a bold brand. This doesn't necessarily mean bold colors or that you have to be dancing all over TikTok, but what I wanna talk about is the fact that safe brands rarely change the world. And if you're interested in making your message a movement, that tells me that you want to make an impact with your work. Yes, you want more revenue and profit.

You want to maybe grow your team and you want to serve a ton of people, but ultimately we are being called, I believe, in this moment to support and make the changes we want to see in the world. As entrepreneurs. And so earlier in my career as a creative director, I sat through more meetings than I can count where a strong idea entered the room and a much safer version walked out. The original concept had energy, a clear point of view. It created a reaction.

You could feel that it was saying something. Rather than simply trying to fill up a space. But then the feedback would begin. Could we make it appeal to a broader audience? Could we remove the part that someone might misunderstand?

Could we make it feel a little more familiar? And each suggestion sounded reasonable on its own, and no one was intentionally trying to ruin the idea, most of the time. Most people believed that they were making it stronger, maybe more accessible or easier to approve. But by the time everyone in the room felt comfortable with it, there was almost nothing left to object to, which means there was almost nothing left to remember. And that experience taught me something I've carried into every part of my work since.

Sometimes consensus is not proof that the message is working. Sometimes it's proof that the message is no longer saying anything valid or exciting. And of course, this happens most often in large organizations because there's so many cooks in the kitchen, per se, but it also happens inside our own businesses. I've seen this so often with clients while we're doing the work, and I have to kind of shift them back. There might not be a boardroom full of people offering feedback, yet we still began anticipating objections before anyone had actually raised one.

Or maybe we start asking opinions of way too many people. We soften one sentence before we publish it. We change our tone. Maybe we change our belief before anyone challenges it. And we oftentimes replace the words we really want to say with language that feels more professional, more acceptable, or easier for everyone to agree with.

And then we wonder why the message doesn't convert as well. Or at all. We wonder why people tell us our work sounds good but can't really remember what we do or what we said. Or we wonder why our content receives polite engagement but rarely sparks a meaningful conversation.

We wonder why people know we are experienced but can't explain what makes our perspective different. The message might be polished, it might be professional, and maybe strategically pretty sound on the surface, but it's safe. And a safe brand rarely, like I said, changes the world. Now, I have to admit, this is something that I really struggled with coming out of corporate, even though I had that awareness. It wasn't until later that I could accept it, and it's something that I still push myself on.

I could absolutely be more bold and have more contrarian views. And I also want to be careful with this because I'm not suggesting that every person needs to become controversial by any means. You do not need to manufacture a polarizing opinion, pick fights with strangers online, or turn every piece of content into a dramatic hot take. Please do not do that. That is not conviction, that is performance, right?

And people will begin to feel that that is out of alignment or authenticity right away. So a brand with conviction does not need to be loud, abrasive, or divisive. It can be warm, It can be welcoming, and it can hold complexity and nuance. It can acknowledge that more than one perspective exists, but it must be willing to say something clear. So for instance, this is what I believe, this is what I believe needs to change, and this is the future I want to help create.

When you're clear on that, It gives your brand a new sense of meaning. Maybe it's, this is why I approach the work differently. Because a safe brand tries to avoid being rejected, a powerful brand gives the right people something worth believing in. And there's a meaningful difference between those 2 intentions. Now, most people don't go out and intend to have a safe brand.

Like I said, it's something that kind of just happens. But when your primary goal, even if it's subconscious, is to avoid rejection, your message begins expanding to accommodate everyone. You remove the specificity in your language because you don't want anyone to feel excluded. Or you avoid naming the problem too directly because someone might disagree with your interpretation. You might try to explain every possible angle because you want people to see that you're thoughtful and intelligent, but then the message becomes so broad that anyone could agree with it, and it's not really meaningful at all.

Agreement is not the same as connection. Of course, someone can agree that leadership matters, authenticity is important, businesses need clarity, people deserve to feel fulfilled. Those ideas might be true, but they are also universally accepted, so they give us very little insight into what you specifically believe, right? Like anyone could say those depending on the line of business that they're in. So what I want you to think about today is, and maybe get out a pen and paper if you have not yet, because I'm going to actually ask you some questions here.

What do you see that others are overlooking? Others in your space doing the same work.

What are people in your industry accepting as normal that you believe needs to change?

And what have years of experience taught you that you can no longer pretend not to know?

That is where thought leadership begins, at the point where you stop simply describing what you do and really start articulating what you believe alongside of it. So if you listened to last week's episode, we talked about the loneliness of being first, like exploring what it feels like to carry an idea before the market fully understands it, right? And the courage required to keep developing that idea before there's widespread proof or approval. So if you haven't listened to the episode, I highly recommend you go back because these two kind of tie together. But seeing something first is only the beginning.

Eventually you have to be willing to say it clearly enough that people know what you stand for, and clearly enough so they can decide whether they believe it too, and clearly enough that the idea can begin moving beyond you. And that's where many amazing, brilliant people hesitate, because they have the insights, they see the patterns, and they know the current approach is not working as well as everyone pretends it does. But when it's time to put that belief into language, they oftentimes retreat towards something safer. And sometimes that's new, like they're new and they're still developing confidence. But I've noticed that it can happen just as easily, and perhaps even more easily, to very established experts because we tend to assume that confidence grows automatically with success.

And in some ways, of course, it does because you know more and you have helped people create results. But success also gives you more to protect. You have a reputation, an audience, clients, revenue, relationships within your industry. You've probably built a career around being respected, credible, dependable. And so suddenly taking a clear position might feel riskier than it did when you had fewer people paying attention.

And this is something subconsciously that most people miss, is that when we're successful, there's this fear of success of not— yes, you can be— have fear of success, of getting more successful and making more money subconsciously, but there's also this fear because there's more risk, right? So maybe you wonder what your peers will think, or you wonder whether the idea could alienate a potential client that's already on your list, or maybe you're worried someone might take something out of context. So what happens is you become more edited, not less intelligent or passionate, but more edited. And I believe this is one of the greatest threats to an established brand, is self-censorship disguised as professionalism, because we tell ourselves that we're being strategic when we're actually trying to remain universally acceptable. You know, you've heard this probably when people are trying to kind of niche down a little bit, and they're like, well, I serve everyone.

And most coaches are like, yes, you do, but you can't be everything to everyone, right? We've all heard that conversation. It's the same thing with the message. We call the message inclusive because we're afraid to choose a position, or we say we want to be nuanced when really we're reluctant to let anyone know what we truly think. And the thing is, there are very few ideas worth leading that can be reduced down to something that is bland and vanilla, right?

So you can acknowledge that complexity and still have a point of view And you can respect people who disagree and still say what you believe. You can be thoughtful without becoming invisible.

And some of the beliefs at the center of my own work began as ideas I could have easily softened into more familiar branding language. Now again, this isn't so far out there. It depends on your body of work. Um, sometimes things are going to be more bold than others. But so one of the things I say is I believe that people do not have an authentic— authenticity problem.

I can never say that word. They have an amnesia problem. They have simply forgotten who they were before expectations and outside opinions taught them who they were supposed to become, right? So that would be something that really differentiates me from other brand experts. And as strange as it sounds, I've had that thought for quite a long time, and it wasn't until very recently that I shared it because it went against the grain of everyone who said authenticity, authenticity, right?

And it's so silly when I look at it and realize you know, that I was editing myself. Also, I talk about being social media optional, the fact that I really do not care for social media. And yes, it can be a valuable tool, but it should not be the fragile foundation your entire business depends on. So there's so much more I could say, and none of these beliefs are going to, like, shock people. But

they create contrast and they challenge an assumption that has become common within the business or branding world.

So they give the right person the opportunity to say, yes, this is what I have been feeling, or I've never considered it that way before. And some people may disagree and say, I don't like what Tiffany is saying, and that simply means they're not my people. And so recognition is what moves a message from being accurate to being meaningful. A meaningful message should create and contain some tension— not manufactured drama, like I said before— but there's a way the work is typically done, and there's a way that you believe it should be done. Instead, and without that contrast, there's nothing for the audience to really move towards versus someone else.

And this is one of the reasons I talk so much about my tagline, making your message a movement, because a movement can't be built around a service menu. It can't be built around the fact that you're experienced or caring or strategic or good at what you do. Yes, those things matter, but they're not enough to bring people together around a shared idea. A movement needs a belief. It needs a change people can participate in and language that allows someone to recognize the problem, understand the possibility, and begin seeing themselves as part of the future you're describing.

A movement does not begin when everyone agrees. It begins when someone articulates a truth the right people already feel, but maybe haven't yet known how to say, or maybe haven't even thought about it yet.

So the approval trap that we're talking about here today It happens in small decisions from experience myself and watching it with clients or helping clients unravel message that came from being safe.

Again, maybe you remove your strongest sentence before publishing the post because you imagine someone disagreeing, or you replace the specific person you most wanted to reach with language broad enough to include everyone. Or you describe your work through titles and terms that the market already recognizes, even though they don't really reflect what you actually do.

There's so much more that I could say here, but we want to think about this is your beliefs should evolve as you learn, and thought leadership doesn't mean performing certainty or pretending you possess you know, the final answer to everything. And I believe the strongest

thought leaders remain curious, so they're going to continue listening, testing, learning, and allowing their idea and message to become more sophisticated.

You can remain open to new information while being clear about what your experience has shown you so far. So you can also say, this is what I believe to be true, without claiming this is the only truth that could ever exist.

List, right? So that's the thing is we don't want to get so locked in on our ideas like this where we're rigid, but we want to have this boldness instead of a safe brand because people trust you when they can tell what you stand for. And when the message remains recognizable across your different platforms, and when you're willing to make decisions that align with what you say and do.

When your message is too safe, referrals become vague because people don't really have a distinctive idea to repeat. They may say you're wonderful, experienced, or helpful, but they struggle to decide or describe why someone needs you specifically.

And what happens is your content begins sounding interchangeable with everyone else in the category. You might actually be sharing valuable information, but it's information the audience could receive anywhere. And podcast hosts and event organizers, for my speakers out there, may recognize your expertise but struggle to identify the conversation only you can lead, right? So safe messaging may help you avoid rejection, but it also makes it harder for the right people to choose you with conviction.

So one of my clients, Ashley, came to me because she had meaningful expertise, but her message was not yet making that authority clear to the outside world. There was a gap between the depth of what she could offer and the way people understood her work. Once we clarified her positioning and gave her stronger language for the ideas she was ready to lead, she was no longer trying to be broadly appealing or explain everything she could possibly do. Her message allowed people to understand and remember, and that shift helped to position her to speak in sold-out rooms. That stage did not appear because we invented a louder version of her.

It became possible because we made the truth of her authority easier to see through the language. Justine, another client of mine, experienced a different version of the transformation. Once we shifted her positioning to speak more directly to a specific ideal client, the market could better understand the value of her work and why it was different. She immediately booked 4 new clients without changing anything else. That result was not created by adding more content or increasing the number of platforms she used.

It came simply by making her message more precise and helping the right people recognize why they should choose her. And I share these examples because having a point of view is not simply a philosophical branding exercise. It literally changes how people respond to your business. So sales conversations begin at a higher level because the person already can understand your perspective before they get on a call. And speaking opportunities become more aligned because event organizers immediately see the conversation that only you are positioned to lead.

And higher caliber clients are more likely to recognize that they are not simply hiring a service provider, they're hiring a thought leader and an expert. So if you are trying to uncover an idea or make your message less safe here, a body of work for people to associate with you, there's some ideas and questions that I offer for you today. So the first is, what do I believe. Now, this isn't everything you possibly believe, um, in your whole life. This is, of course, as it pertains to the business, but not what do I sell or what title do I use or things like that.

What do I believe? Perhaps you believe healing should not separate the physical body from energy, intuition, or spirit. Or perhaps you believe a book should not be treated as an isolated product, but as the cornerstone of larger intellectual property. Perhaps you believe nonprofit growth should not come at the expense of people carrying the mission. The belief does not need to be revolutionary to the entire world.

Let me get that clear, but it needs to be true enough, specific enough, and meaningful enough to guide your work and call in the people you're looking to work with? Second question, as we start to wrap up here: What needs to change? A belief becomes more powerful when it creates and reveals some tension. So what assumption is limiting your clients, or what accepted practice is producing an outcome you believe is no longer good enough? What are people being told to do that is pulling them further away from what they actually need?

For me, one answer that too many experts are being encouraged to manufacture a marketable identity instead of uncovering the truth of who they already are and building from there. And that is the tension that I can bring to the conversation.

The problem is not that people are incapable of being authentic. It's that they've absorbed so many expectations and outside voices that they no longer remember what was true before they started performing what they believed the market wanted, right? That's huge. And then the third question is, what future am I inviting people into? And this might be the most important question because conviction should not stop at criticism.

Pointing out what is broken is not the same as leading. A thought leader gives people language for the future they want to help create. So what happens or becomes possible when people adopt your belief? What changes in the way they lead, work, heal, build, communicate, or see themselves? And what would your industry look like if more people approach the work the way that you believe it should be approached?

The strongest thought leaders do not merely criticize the existing world, they make another world easier to imagine. And that is what creates a movement.

And there is a great deal of advice telling people that they need to become more polarizing, and sometimes that advice could be helpful because a message has become so broad that it no longer creates meaningful responses. But polarization in itself should never become the goal. So the goal is to make the right people feel something true. Sometimes that would be relief, maybe possibility, maybe it's the discomfort of recognizing the old way is no longer working. A meaningful message can create tension without, without creating hostility.

It can challenge people without shaming them. It can be bold and still be humane. And that is the kind of conviction I believe we need more of. Not louder opinions thrown into an already noisy world, but beliefs held with enough confidence to lead and enough humanity to invite others into the conversation. And we're living in a time when it has never been easier to produce polished, acceptable content.

AI, as you know, can generate articles, social posts, industry tips, and the internet is overflowing with language that is technically correct. But correct is not the same as memorable and meaningful. And more content is absolutely not more thought leadership. So what's going to become increasingly valuable is not simply the ability to generate information, it's the courage to have perspective, your discernment, your willing to connect ideas other people have that connected, your ability to articulate what you believe and why it matters. And AI can help you develop, organize, and express those ideas.

Don't get me wrong, I love AI too, but it cannot decide what you are willing to stand for. That is and always will be human work. And I believe it's some of the most important work you will ever do inside your brand. Because yes, a brand can be built around what you sell. But a movement must be built around what you believe.

The right people are not searching for another perfectly polished expert who repeats everything they know. They're really searching for someone willing to articulate the truth and show them where it could lead. So as we wrap up, I want to leave you with one final question today. What

is something you believe about your work, your clients, or your industry that you've been afraid to say clearly?

Because once you say it, the beautiful thing is people will know where you stand, and perhaps that is what your brand has been missing. Perhaps that is the idea for a future keynote, book, method, or movement. And perhaps the safest version of your message has already taken you as far as it can. So if you know your message has become too broad, too safe, or too similar to anyone else's, book a call with me through the link in the show notes. I want to help you uncover the belief at the center of your work and build the positioning, language, and brand capable of carrying it forward.

We do not need more safe brands. We need brands that change the world. And I believe that you're here to do just that. So have a beautiful rest of your week, and we'll see you here next week.