



Having an identity crisis?
We've got the intel on
building a strong brand
for your store.

A BRAND-NEW LOOK

BY JEN JONES

Ever wonder why Apple has so many loyal customers? Marketing experts argue that it has less to do with the company's technology than it has to do with its branding. Since the late '80s the company has focused on marketing that evokes heartfelt emotions and intense loyalty in its customers—resulting in very high repeat sales. You, too, can follow in the footsteps of the well-known computer company by fine-tuning your business strategy. “Many dance retailers are mom-and-pop shops or small businesses and don’t necessarily have a clear brand identity—or at least it doesn’t come to life in the store experience they’ve designed,” says Denise Lee Yohn, owner of San Diego-based Brand as Business. “If you consistently deliver a compelling and appealing customer experience, people will buy more and visit more. Having a stronger brand can do all those things.”

So how can you pump up the volume of your brand? According to Yohn, it’s all about differentiating your store from the pack,

DETERMINE YOUR COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

A store can’t be everything to everyone, and dance retailers shouldn’t try to be. Stores are better off identifying their strong suit and promoting that as their main brand strategy. “I counsel businesses that a focused approach is a better one; it’s best to design your brand as being really good at one thing,” advises Yohn, who counts New Balance and Jamba Juice among her clients. “When you start talking about too many things, your message ends up getting diluted.”

For Beatrix Dozier, establishing her store as the premier destination for Latin dancers has been essential to its success. In 2007, Dozier capitalized on the popularity of her website latindancestore.com and opened a brick-and-mortar location in Garden Grove, CA. “We have shoes for all styles of dance, but I’m known in the community as the place to get your Latin shoes and clothing,” says Dozier. “When people think of Latin Dance Store, I want them to think

of the best quality Latin dance items at affordable prices.”

To that end, Dozier has designed her window displays to show off the store’s wide selection of ballroom shoes—along with a “Learn Salsa” banner advertising her adjacent studio. She further strengthens the affiliation by participating in salsa conventions, events and workshops in the Southern California area. It’s a targeted brand strategy—and a seemingly effective one based on the store’s sizable growth in its short existence.

Being the preferred destination for a specific dance genre isn’t the only way to establish a store’s competitive advantage. A brand can also be built around strengths like supreme customer service, carrying the trendiest merchandise or involvement in the local dance community. According to Yohn, the key is to identify the differentiation for your store and build that out into a complete store experience for your customer. “If your brand is built around customer service, then you need to think about how every single one of your service policies supports that:

How generous is your return policy? Are you truly going the extra mile all the time for your customers?" she says. "If your brand is all about having the latest products, you might want to send out teaser announcements or offer exclusive shopping events when new items come in. It's all about reinforcing your position."

Positioning her store as an ally for the Evanston, IL, dance community has been the brand strategy of choice for Allegro Dance Boutique owner Victoria Lyman. To convey this brand message, Lyman is installing a flat-screen television in the store to showcase videos of local dance performances. She also recently created a partnership with a Chicago dance company that will allow her to feature several of its dancers in marketing materials. "I'm a dancer who's active in the community, so I want the brand to reflect that. We're very in touch with what's going on in the dance community in Chicago and the suburbs," says Lyman, who has owned the store for three years. "That has made it really easy to distinguish ourselves."

Attention to small details will help to further define your brand message. "All the different touch points retailers don't normally consider are opportunities to strengthen your brand—from how a customer is greeted to what the name tag looks like," says Yohn. "It's all about the different ways a customer experiences your brand." **E**

Jen Jones is a dance instructor and freelance writer based in Los Angeles.

BUILDING YOUR BRAND

What should every storeowner have in his or her toolbox? We've consulted with our sources to find out what's instrumental to building a brand.

Store Name: Often your store's first point of customer contact is its name, which can be a powerful tool in conveying brand. Allegro Dance Boutique's Lyman wiped the slate clean after purchasing the store several years ago. "It was previously called Before the Ballet—which was cute, but it wasn't right for us," says Lyman, who changed the name to Allegro Dance Boutique last August. "People thought of us as a ballet store for kids, and we knew there was so much more to our store. Our goal is to attract dancers of all ages and interests, and they all have such distinct personalities that we needed a name that would appeal to all of them."

Tagline: Adding a tagline to your store name provides the opportunity to further expound on your store's mission. Allegro Dance Boutique's tagline is "apparel for bodies in motion" (with intentional lowercase letters), while Latin Dance Store touts itself as having "Everything You Need for a Great Night of Dancing."

At Huntington, NY-based Prouette, owners Stephanie Swensen and Kathleen Caridi have built their brand around Swensen's expertise in shoe-fitting with the tagline: "Pointe Shoes Fitted to Perfection." From day one, their business promotion has been geared around a specialization in pointe-shoe fitting. "We agreed that brand identity is what you put out there to be perceived as, and also what you hold as your commitment to the client," Caridi says.

Marketing: The ways to promote your business in advertising and marketing platforms are almost endless—yet for optimal effect, even the forms you choose should be aligned with your desired message. For instance, a large portion of Latin Dance Store's business is conducted online at latindancestore.com, so owner Dozier has poured her energy into creating a strong online marketing presence. "I do a lot of marketing on MySpace and Facebook, and my events wall on Facebook has been a great avenue for promoting store and studio happenings," she says. She has also

invested in search engine optimization for her own site. For Lyman at Allegro, whose brand is progressive and hip, much of her marketing is done on Twitter rather than by placing newspaper advertisements.

Signage: From Lyman's perspective, it's crucial to recognize in-store signage as a valuable opportunity to share brand messages with customers. "Many retailers carry bamboo fabrics and cool leotards made out of great cutting-edge fabrics, but there is nothing in the store besides the salesperson to tell the customer," she says. "It's important for us to have signs in the store that allow the customer to learn about our offerings and shop independently." To that end, Lyman has purchased attractive frames to designate different sections in the store and highlight notable selling points.

According to Yohn, Lyman's approach is right in line with her desired branding as an ally for the dance community. "It's a must to develop key messaging that can be used in all of your marketing materials and signage," says Yohn. "Everywhere someone turns in the store, they should get communication about this differentiation. Is your visual strategy signage and layout really showing your message?"

Store Atmosphere: A store's look and feel is an extremely important non-verbal way to communicate brand. In keeping with Prouette's ballet-centric branding, Caridi and Swensen have put a great deal of effort into creating a welcoming ambiance for ballerinas. Tutus beckon from the front window while pointe shoes and photos signed by professional ballerinas hang throughout the store. A ballet mural dots the wall, and the pièce de résistance is a large stage (replete with barre) where all pointe-shoe fittings are conducted. "We've consciously tried to create an experience that goes with our brand," says Caridi, who has co-owned the store for 10 years. "Everyone is made to feel special—it's a dancer's moment when they're up onstage with Stephanie."



Latin Dance Store in Garden Grove, CA, displays Latin and ballroom shoe styles prominently.

Photo courtesy of Latin Dance Store