



*The Past,
Present and
Future of*

COFFEE BRANDING

*(Plus How
to Use It)*

By Kat Melheim



ABOVE
Arbuckles' Ariosa
Coffee branding,
established in 1859.
Photo by
Wesley Fryer

**PRECEDING
PAGE**
Huckleberry Coffee
Roasters in Denver.
Photo courtesy of
Huckleberry Coffee
Roasters

THINK OF A SUCCESSFUL COFFEE company. What comes to mind? The quality of its coffee, the logo and colors it uses, the look and feel of its cafes, perhaps even its presence on social media—all of these elements are part of that company's brand. From the first roasting businesses to present-day coffee companies that you know and love, branding has played a key role in differentiating one roaster from another and continues to be a defining aspect of a company's identity.

What sets a strong brand apart from a weak one, and how did we get where we are today? In this article, I explore the history of coffee branding, provide helpful tips to bolster your brand, and attempt to forecast coming trends within the coffee space. Whether you have spent months dialing in your brand strategy, or you have not taken a second to think about it, you

will find historical context, actionable exercises, and professional expertise to better understand and use branding to your advantage.

HISTORY

The Beginnings of Coffee Branding

Through the early 19th century, coffee was an undifferentiated consumable product. Like other raw goods such as flour, sugar and wheat, green coffee was sold in large barrels at the general store. Customers would buy green coffee, take it home, and roast it themselves. That all changed in the United States after the Civil War.

According to Mark Pendergrast, author of *Uncommon Grounds: A History of Coffee and How It*

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LEFT
Vintage coffee cans.
Photo by Chris Ereneta

RIGHT
A vintage coffee ad
from a 1934 issue of
Country Gentleman.

Transformed Our World, it all started with Arbuckles' Coffee. "Branding didn't really happen until it was possible to have industry," says Pendergrast. "You had the development of the first decent roaster by Jabez Burns, and it became possible to roast a large amount of coffee." Arbuckles' took this innovation and ran with it, inventing ways to preserve the freshness of roasted coffee, including coating the coffee in a sugar and egg glaze and packaging it in paper bags. While paper bags primarily functioned to keep the coffee fresh, Arbuckles' discovered another purpose for the bags: branding. The company printed its name, beautiful imagery, and even coupons on the coffee bags. "They became a huge, big deal, and the first



really well-known brand," says Pendergrast. This success brought the concept of roasted, packaged, branded coffee to the American masses. By the turn of the 20th century, consumption trends had shifted from raw to roasted coffee as other companies such as Hills Brothers, Folgers and Maxwell House entered the market.

A similar trend swept through Europe's coffee sector around the same time. Local colonial stores (shops that specialized in imported goods) began roasting coffee in-house, advertising it as more consistent and less expensive than roasting at home. This was the origin of many of Europe's most prominent roasters, including Julius Meinl in Austria

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(1862) and Luigi Lavazza in Italy (1895). According to Jonathan Morris, professional historian and author of *Coffee: A Global History*, mass messaging around the world at this time was simple: “We know you don’t know much about coffee, but if you stick with our brand, you’ll be okay.” These companies knew they were selling more than roasted coffee; they were selling convenience, quality and confidence—not only in their product, but in their brand.

Mass Media Through the 20th Century

As industry advanced and popular media spread, coffee companies found new ways to enter the homes of potential customers. With the advent of radio came sponsored radio shows. Morris states, “Maxwell House got very famous for sponsoring radio shows—it was called the Maxwell House Show Boat. It established Maxwell House as providing you with entertainment. Radio is quite a domestic thing, and coffee was quite a domestic thing. It was a nice alignment of values.” Mass adoption of new technology brought coffee companies into daily life for people who hadn’t even purchased their product yet. After radio came television, which allowed for more creativity in

branding. From early animation cartoons by Lavazza, to Nescafé’s story of the “Gold Blend couple” who fall in love over coffee, to Folgers’ “best part of waking up” jingle, coffee brands sought to tell a story that entertained and enticed the masses. For more than a century, coffee branding was characterized by this domestic nature, using popular media (lithographed packaging, radio sponsorship and TV ads) to reach customers where they consumed their coffee—in the comfort of their own homes.

Riding the Second & Third Waves to Today

As popular consumption shifted away from at-home brewing and toward cafe-prepared beverages in the late 20th century, so did coffee branding. Coffee marketing expert Jenn Chen reflects, “When I’m thinking about second wave, it’s the cozy environment of the cafe. A lot of browns.” With the emergence of coffee shop chains like Starbucks, Peet’s and Caribou, branding focused on the experience in the cafe space. Even as these companies spread across the world, opening stores on every other street corner, some consumers continued to brew coffee in their homes. It wasn’t long before another shift occurred, this time

toward the coffee itself. It focused on small-batch, specialty, high-quality coffee—in the home and the cafe.

Chen continues, “When third wave came in, people wanted to distinguish themselves. I remember seeing a lot of kraft paper bags with a stamp or sticker on top. Anything to show craftsmanship and being handmade, that quality and care went into the product.” Trish Rothgeb of Wrecking Ball Coffee Roasters coined the term “third wave” to describe this development in the coffee market. “Twenty years ago,” Rothgeb says, brands focused on “visual cues that said, ‘We’re serious. We’re clean. We’re elevated.’ Everyone wanted clean Scandinavian design, to have a certain look on their coffee bag, takeaway blackboards in the cafe, a clipboard with a single piece of paper with the menu. It was elevating and becoming more like fine dining.” But, Rothgeb says, the scope of coffee brands is expanding today and becoming less uniform. And she likes it. “One thing that’s true today is that there’s more variety. You don’t have to be one kind of thing anymore. You don’t have to be what everyone else is. So you see new coffee places opening with a lot of color splashes, nothing too corporate looking, nothing too clean. It means we’re secure in ourselves. We can do whatever we want. And that is new.”



Branding for Wrecking Ball Coffee Roasters. Photo by Juan Ortez Jr.

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LEFT
Mother Tongue coffee branding. Photo courtesy of Mother Tongue Coffee

RIGHT
Anissa Cisneros and Jen Apodaca of Mother Tongue Coffee. Photo courtesy of Mother Tongue Coffee

HOW TO BRAND YOUR BUSINESS

A Guide to Jump-Start (or Reinvent) Your Strategy

From the first printed bags of Arbuckles' Coffee to the thousands of specialty roasters on the scene today, what sets a company apart from the rest is its brand. So, what makes a brand, and how can you strengthen yours? Many people think of a company's name, logo, what the coffee bags or cafe look like—essentially the visual aesthetic. But branding is more than meets the eye, though that is part of it. Jenn Hall, brand manager at Black and White Coffee Roasters, says, "Your brand is actually your personality, your identity. What are your morals and values you're always going to stick to, your goals, your plans? Branding is building the essence behind a business." Creating and maintaining a brand can seem overwhelming, but here are a few places to start:



- **Decide what you're about.** Dr. Spencer Ross, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Massachusetts Manning School of Business, notes, "The first step is to identify your mission or purpose in the marketplace. The core is going back to one's core and identifying what it is you're aiming to do, why it is you're here, what is the purpose of what you're trying to do with your shop, with your roastery, and go from there." When you are clear about what you want to accomplish, creating a strong brand will become more natural.

- **Write it down.** Chen recommends keeping notes. "I'm a fan of documentation. Write all the stuff down. Put in examples of what would be appropriate logo usage, how you would like your colors to show, the fonts, brand-specific vocabulary. Put all that stuff somewhere you can reference and edit later if you change things." Jessica Caisse, director of marketing



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COFFEE BRANDING

at Mother Tongue Coffee Roasters, agrees: “As corny as it is, sit down, get a big piece of butcher paper and start writing out, ‘Company X is...’ and ‘Company X is not...’ and you can just start from that exercise.” Referencing notes can help keep you on track and allow you to adjust as needed.

● **Create a clear and consistent brand identity.** This is where visuals and brand voice come in. Curate your name, logo, colors, labels, language, bag design, cafe layout and other elements so they are in line with your purpose and goals. Keep it consistent, especially in public-facing spaces. Areli Barrera de Grodski, co-founder of Little Waves Coffee Roasters, notes, “You want to distinguish yourself on the shelves, especially in grocery stores and being outside of your local community. People consume with their eyes first.” How will your customers know a product is yours just by looking at it? That is the role of brand identity.

● **Decide which social platforms are right for you (if any) and connect with your audience.** The experts are split on whether social media is critical for a coffee brand to succeed, as it depends on the scope and goals of your business. For a local cafe space with a strong physical presence, social media may not be necessary. However, for a roastery with aspirations to grow, social media can be a useful tool. TikTok is great for short-form video, pop culture and connecting with younger audiences; Instagram for image-driven content and online sales; YouTube for longer-format videos and tutorials; Facebook for updating business profiles geared toward an aging customer base. Chen notes, “Email newsletters are still the most effective in terms of marketing. Getting people to purchase stuff, people still respond to email.”

It’s important to note that, across all platforms, algorithms are constantly changing. Many people I interviewed said they have seen their engagement peak and plummet, depending on how social platforms prioritize content. Rothgeb says, “You can’t rest on social media because it’s changing and evolving every day into something else. Instagram is changing before

my eyes, and I have to figure out what to do about that.” If you use social media, make sure to create connections with your audience that transcend the platform.

Keep in mind that, no matter the brand, it still represents a business, and a business is only as good as its bottom line. When I asked Evan Gilman, creative director at Royal Coffee, about the purpose of branding, he had a direct answer: “Honestly, sales.” The best branding in the world will not make up for a product that does not deliver. If your branding doesn’t result in profit, your business—no matter how beautiful—will not be viable.

Remaining Consistent While Navigating Changing Trends

Maintaining a consistent brand identity can be difficult in the face of changing cultural trends, customer demands and consumption patterns. How do you keep up with the shifting landscape while staying true to yourself? Little Waves’ Barrera de Grodski navigated customer requests for a dark roast by creating Royal 7, the company’s first dark roast, leveraging sales of the blend to support Feed Durham, a local grassroots organization. She says it’s about “approaching those coffee decisions through your lens that aligns with how you approach everything else. It’s finding opportunities to continue to stay aligned with your mission while having something that your supporters are asking for.”

For Rothgeb, Wrecking Ball’s early cafe menus focused on single origins, highlighting the unique qualities of every coffee. Now, Rothgeb says, things have changed. “Maybe that is a reaction to the pandemic,” she says, “because I just want to make people happy.” This has meant creating and integrating blends as regular offerings. “For me, my menu is smaller and more consistent on purpose,” she explains. “At this point in my career, I’ve worked out the itch to do something creative, and now I just want people to be happy about their cup of coffee.” Having a strong brand doesn’t mean you never change; it means changing in ways that are consistent with your values.



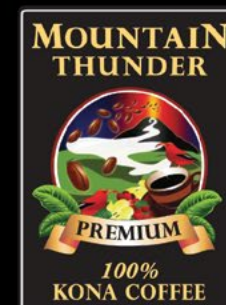
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LEFT
Wrecking Ball Coffee Roasters. Photo by Juan Ortez Jr.



RIGHT
Black and White Coffee Roasters. Photo courtesy of Black and White Coffee Roasters

**Setting Yourself Apart—
Keyword: Authenticity**

The strength of specialty coffee at this moment is that there is an established baseline of quality, a foundational understanding that specialty coffee tastes good. So how do you differentiate your brand from the rest? Throughout my interviews with professional brand managers, academics and roastery owners, there was one word that everyone mentioned: authenticity. Perhaps overused in today's landscape of picture-perfect content, true authenticity cannot be overlooked or dismissed. It also, by definition, cannot be manufactured or faked. The reason authenticity works is that consumers want to see themselves in the products they purchase.

"It's clear that our culture is in a real moment of identity right now," says Peter Giuliano, executive director of the Coffee Science Foundation. "There's more choices about who you are than there ever have been." That is reflected in the variety of coffee choices as well, which allows every company enough market

share to be authentically itself, as long as it can reach its audience. Rothgeb celebrates this new advent in specialty coffee, rejoicing, "Just be you. Find out what it is that you want to be and [don't] be afraid to just go hard on it. People should be who they are and fly their flag. People will come. And it's not going to just be your people, it's going to be everybody because people want that variety."

**LOOKING AHEAD: THE NEXT PHASE
OF SPECIALTY COFFEE BRANDING**

Over the past 150 years, coffee branding has changed drastically. So, what's next in the landscape of coffee branding? Futurecasting is a difficult endeavor, and nothing is certain, but the experts I talked to had this to say:

● **Visual identity will continue to diversify.** Gilman thinks brands will venture further away from clean lines and embrace a grittier look. Rothgeb anticipates



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Branding from Araku Coffee, India. Careful thought went into their modern branding including the geometric design on the packaging made to represent the coffee leaf. Photo courtesy of Araku Coffee

more color, bold designs and leaving the “clean” minimalist aesthetic in the past. Barrera de Grodsky sees imagery that is reflective of the cultures and identities of minority business owners.

- **Video is the way of the future.** Whether it’s TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube, or a platform that hasn’t yet appeared, video-driven content is engaging more audiences (especially younger ones) as we live more of our lives in the digital world, according to Chen, Rothgeb and Giuliano.

- **Values-based purchasing will increase, especially as consumers have more direct relationships with brands via social platforms.** Chen notes, “I see

consumers holding companies more accountable for not having actions that match what they said their values were.” Pendergrast and Gilman agree. Whether that is treatment of employees, green buying practices, or environmental and social issues—brands will have to demonstrate that their behavior upholds their words.

Though past trends have faded and the future is unknown, we find ourselves in an unprecedented time for coffee branding. There are more roasters now than ever before, and each has the opportunity to reach a wider audience than has previously been possible. This unique crossroads of branding trends and consumer preferences has opened space for coffee companies to do what they want and showcase who they are. As Rothgeb says, “My wish is that I see everyone doing different stuff, all the things happening. There is no ‘have to’ anymore, and that’s what’s exciting.”



KAT MELHEIM is a roaster, barista, writer and artist. She founded *Coffee People Zine*, an art and coffee publication, to celebrate the creativity of the coffee community. Through all her work, Melheim strives to create content that entertains, educates, and ultimately connects people to one another.

RESOURCES

TO LEARN MORE about the history of coffee branding, check out Mark Pendergrast’s *Uncommon Grounds: A History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World*, Jonathan Morris’ *Coffee: A Global History*, and the podcast “A History of Coffee.”

For resources on branding, sign up for Jenn Chen’s newsletter, available at jennchen.com.



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