

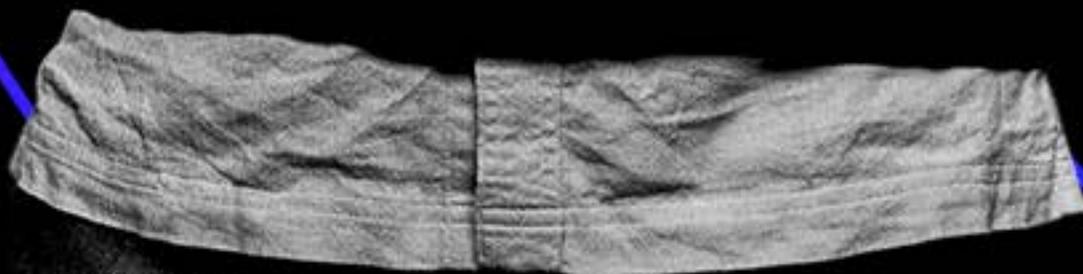
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ISSUE 96



## FLIPPING *The* SCRIPT

Marc Randolph  
of Netflix



**Branding**

# **5 WAYS TO BUILD AN AUTHENTIC BRAND LIKE FIRE DEPARTMENT COFFEE (EVEN IF YOU'RE SMALL)**

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**By Clay Ostrom**

**W**hen your brand is young and growing, it's easy to feel limited by what you don't have—budget, people, resources. Instead, by leaning into the assets you do have, you can

tell an authentic story and build trust with customers, all without a massive team or bank account.

Big brands have big teams and often hire big agencies. They can afford to invest in million dollar marketing campaigns. They create perfectly staged photos, shoot feature film quality videos, and write carefully honed taglines.

Big brands also have lots of customers (some of which you may want to steal away), so it's easy to think you should try and mimic their style.

That's the trap.

**When you try to compete with big brands on their level, there are two likely outcomes:**

- 1.** You'll end up with a low-grade approximation of the big brand.
- 2.** You'll blend in with the noise of competitors who are also trying to replicate the big brand's strategy.

Neither of those outcomes help you stand out and attract new customers. In fact, they could actively hurt your ability to connect with your audience.

As a small brand, you don't need to play the same game or follow the same rules as big brands.

There are a couple key advantages that every small brand can use to build authenticity and differentiate themselves from big brands.

**Small brands can:**

- 1.** Tell a brand story on a personal level
- 2.** Create meaningful connections between their customers and the people within the business

Big brands know authenticity has become a key asset in building brand loyalty.

Unfortunately, being transparent, vulnerable, and personal gets more difficult once you have thousands of employees and millions (or billions) of dollars at stake.

The trick, then, is how should small brands make use of these advantages? What are some ways to express the unique qualities of your brand and do it within the resources that are available?

To make these ideas concrete, let's look at a small, growing brand that's done an awesome job embodying authenticity.

**Branding**

## Brand Spotlight: Fire Department Coffee



Fire Department Coffee (FDC) was founded in 2016 by Luke Schneider, a full-time firefighter/paramedic and U.S. Navy veteran.

Schneider formed a strong personal connection with coffee after working long shifts both in the service and then as a firefighter. With his wife, Kate, who had worked as a barista, they started roasting their own beans for family and friends.

After a lot of trial and error and positive feedback, they decided to turn the hobby into an actual business. And specifically, a business that did more than just make great coffee—they wanted the business to give back to the firefighting community.

To help grow that vision, Luke brought on fellow firefighter Jason Patton as vice president and eventual lead in most of their video content. Together over the past four years, they've grown from kitchen experiments to a capacity of 4 million pounds of coffee per year.

They now have their own nonprofit arm, the Fire Dept. Coffee Foundation. Through that, they donate 10% of net proceeds to help provide essential resources and assistance to first responders who deal with mental or physical issues due to their job.

Let's look at some of the ways FDC infuses authenticity into their brand and how it can apply to your own business.



## The Team

**When considering unique assets of your brand, there's no better place to start than your people. On their site's Home page and About page, FDC features high quality photos of the people behind the business.**

Highlighting your people creates a natural, emotional connection with the brand.

It not only helps customers know who they're purchasing from, but it also shows that there are real people there to help if needed.

With FDC, there's an extra layer of value in showing the team because it's run by actual firefighters. Seeing that front and center immediately builds a sense of authenticity.

That trust is particularly important because of the charitable aspect of FDC's brand.

When customers can see who runs the company and the purpose of the nonprofit component, you immediately understand how your purchase will help make a real difference.

## Video Content

**F**DC does a great job of showing how you can build out a full brand voice through video. They use their YouTube channel to highlight both their products and their sense of humor.

In talking with Schneider, he said that they write and direct the pieces in house and hire a team to shoot and edit.

It's another great example of how a small team can make the most of their talent and make the brand feel even more personal.

And when it comes to video, tools and software have never been more accessible.

Regardless of your brand's size, there's no reason not to find creative ways to express yourself.

## Branding



## Customer Service

focus on great customer service is critical for a young brand and it's the ideal place to build authentic, personal connections.

FDC treats their customer service with the same care and attention that they use in their first responder duties.

**VP Jason Patton said he wants their customers to think, "That's the company that I want in my house. That's the company that if I ever truly need something that I can contact them and they'll always answer the call."**

That's what great customer service is all about. And it's why when we experience that type of attention we remember it and want to keep coming back to the brand.

It takes real effort and focus to provide that type of care, but every young brand should view that as a necessary investment.



## Brand Mission



One more area where FDC does a great job of creating a cohesive, authentic brand is the embodiment of their mission. Their business model to give back 10% of net proceeds to injured first responders is meaningful and inspiring.

And beyond providing inspiration for customers and helping those in need, this type of brand extension also creates deeper loyalty within your team.

We all want to feel like our work aligns with our personal values. When we see direct results of how our work helps others, it helps us become self-actualized. Those are bonds that get people to go above and beyond and stick around for the long haul.

## Opportunity to Improve: Tone and Messaging

If there's one area where FDC could amplify their brand even more it's with their messaging.

**Right now, outside of their videos, the tone and message are fairly simple and straightforward. The positive side is that it makes everything easy to digest and understand. The downside is that it can also feel a little bit bland and less memorable.**

FDC obviously enjoys experimenting with their tone through their videos, so it would be nice to see some of that personality come through on the site as well.

The brand voice doesn't have to be humorous, just more evocative and connected to the product offerings.

### For example:

Rather than saying "Run By Firefighters," they could try "Handcrafted Coffee For Everyday Heroes."

Rather than saying "Free Shipping On Coffee Subscriptions," they could try "With Subscriptions, We'll Always Have Your Back (Shipping's On Us!)"

Rather than saying "Ceramic Mugs: Ceramic mugs hold 12-16oz of your favorite beverage," they could try "Mugs Forged In Fire: Stable design for bumpy rides, and unlimited refills (as long as you buy enough coffee!)"

Developing a tone and messaging that's integrated with your brand creates a stronger emotional connection and makes your brand more memorable.

## Embrace The Advantages Of Being Small

While smaller brands may not have the same resources to throw at their marketing, there are plenty of other benefits.

When you're small, you can take more chances because there's less risk. And when you're small you can make decisions and implement things quickly without endless layers of approvals.

Those advantages naturally fade away as your brand grows in size and complexity. Take advantage of them while you can!

Your small size and limited resources may feel like a constraint, but when it comes to creativity, constraints provide focus. Focus on the assets and advantages you have, and you'll find plenty of ways to create an authentic brand that attracts loyal customers.



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