

BLACK ENTERPRISE

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How to Build a Race-Neutral Brand

Being a black entrepreneur doesn't have to define your business. Here are some strategies for attracting a diverse customer base



Entrepreneur Lauren Maillan Bias (Image: Courtesy of The Young Entrepreneur Council)

I always knew that I wanted my work to leave an indelible imprint on society, but I never thought I would be underestimated because of my race and put in a position to justify the true reasons for my success. How I entered the wine industry – where black ownership is nearly nonexistent – and the reputation I earned would ultimately determine my success. I had a lot to prove, a short amount of time to make it happen, all eyes were on me to either sink or swim and I knew first impressions were everything. The idea of learning how to brand a business as race neutral while still embracing what made me and my business unique was something I hadn't considered.

At 19-years-old I was building a vineyard and winery from the ground-up and on the road to being the youngest female winery owners in the country. The winery, later branded as **Sugarleaf Vineyards**,

became one of less than ten black owned wineries in the country, and the only black owned winery on the East Coast. I would face various hurdles for the many definitions that would define me – a young, black, woman, a pioneering female entrepreneur in a male dominated industry and in the south nonetheless.

I quickly realized that building a business also meant building a brand. I had the added challenge of trying to gain the confidence of the naysayers, and the support of everyone. And while the African American community would eventually become some of my most loyal supporters, I was forced to figure out how to ensure that my race was not going to be the defining factor of my new business.

Still it was frustrating to receive calls saying, "I didn't know there was black wine." How do you politely inform someone there is no such thing as "black wine?" A black owned winery, yes, and that I proudly accepted. But I wanted the winery to be known and respected for being a boutique vineyard and winery that crafted exceptional wines and provided an unparalleled experience for our visitors. And I wanted being black to be the least important distinction.

I felt the pressure of the expectations from the African American community, whom I wanted to be proud of my accomplishments. I wanted the wine industry to take me seriously and happily count me as a new member of the professional community. And perhaps most importantly, I wanted customers of all cultures to visit the winery and enjoy the wine. I did this by ensuring that Sugarleaf was first and foremost defined by the outstanding wines it produced, our knowledgeable and friendly staff, and finally by the breathtaking and well maintained property. I considered the issue of race happenstance and almost inconsequential.

There is something to be said, however, for a minority-owned business that was able to gain industry respect and recognition because its founder worked hard, was passionate, smart, innovative, and motivated to shatter proverbial glass ceilings.

So what tools helped me to build a business that attracted all races?

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1. **Get to know the competition.** And let them get to know who you are and what your brand represents. Prove your worthiness and gain the respect and support of any potential naysayers early on. They may prove to be your allies in the future.
2. **Diversify your image.** If the main source of revenue for your businesses is in retail, where there is a lot face-to-face interaction with customers, make sure your public image is as diverse as possible. Your biggest assets in retail are your employees, who represent your brand and sell your products. Your employees are the face of your business in your absence. Make sure every potential customer sees someone that they would feel comfortable approaching.
3. **Understand how your company is perceived.** Use social media to stay connected to customers. Read the online opinions and critiques of your business to find out how people view and perceive your brand. Unbiased opinions are very important especially when mass appeal is one of your businesses goals.
4. **Highlight what defines you.** Make it a point to highlight all of your education, accomplishments, accolades, and press to solidify your position in your industry as an expert in your field. Enumerate the collective experiences of your company's partners and consultants. Soon you'll be respected for your success regardless of your race, and you'll find your business highly regarded for the work it does. Remember, no one can take your hard earned success away from you.
5. **Be neutral.** Step out of your box and develop your business' brand identity to satisfy more than just your personal preferences. Create a branding campaign and plan that reiterates your company's mission irrespective of the principals behind the brand.