

# COMMAND YOUR BRAND

THESE ARE FIVE CRITICAL BRANDING MISTAKES THAT WAY TOO MANY PET BUSINESSES MAKE.

BY MONICA CEVALLOS



**MONICA CEVALLOS** is founder and owner of Sniff Design Studio, a small, award-winning graphic design boutique and pet blog that has catered exclusively to pet business professionals around the world since 2003. Contact Monica at: [info@sniffdesign.com](mailto:info@sniffdesign.com)

BRANDING is a critical element in the success of any business, big or small. When done well, it's like offering a firm handshake to each and every potential client you meet. And when done badly, it's like sticking your tongue out at the world. So why do so many people get it wrong? Let's look at five of the biggest branding mistakes that too many pet professionals regularly make.

**Mistake #1: They don't understand the power of a brand.**

→ Your store design, logo, signage and advertising are all a bold statement that you are making to everyone who sees it. Those potential customers are going to quickly boil down your statement and file it in one of three basic categories: "We are really cool!" or "We are pretty average!" or "We are a freaking mess!" Once that statement is made, it is very hard to convince potential customers differently. This may sound like heresy to some, but a well-executed brand can even cover up for a weak service — at least for a little while. (At the very least, a strong brand buys you more tolerance for your mistakes.)

**Mistake #2: They skimp on what it costs to build a brand.**

→ Building a powerful brand takes time, skill and money. Too many pet

business owners try to brand their new businesses (or re-brand their existing ones) over a single weekend. Saturday, they sip wine and think strategic "big" thoughts about their business. And then on Sunday, they go nuts with a CD of clip-art and a million Windows fonts. Believe me: in the end, your audience can see *exactly* what you

Customers see an inconsistent brand as **unreliable**. To avoid this, establish a detailed style guide for your business and follow it religiously.

invested in creating your brand. Just as bad as doing a bad D-I-Y job is hiring out your critical identity work to a \$99-per-logo factory that doesn't care one bit about what lasting impression your business will make.

**Mistake #3: They don't stick to strong brand guidelines.**

→ Once you've established your brand style, stick to it. While it will be incredibly tempting to use a color or a font outside of your business's usual style, doing this too often will negatively impact your customers' perceptions. Customers see an inconsistent brand as unreliable. This negative perception can be easily avoided by establishing

a detailed style guide for your business and following it religiously. Stay disciplined!

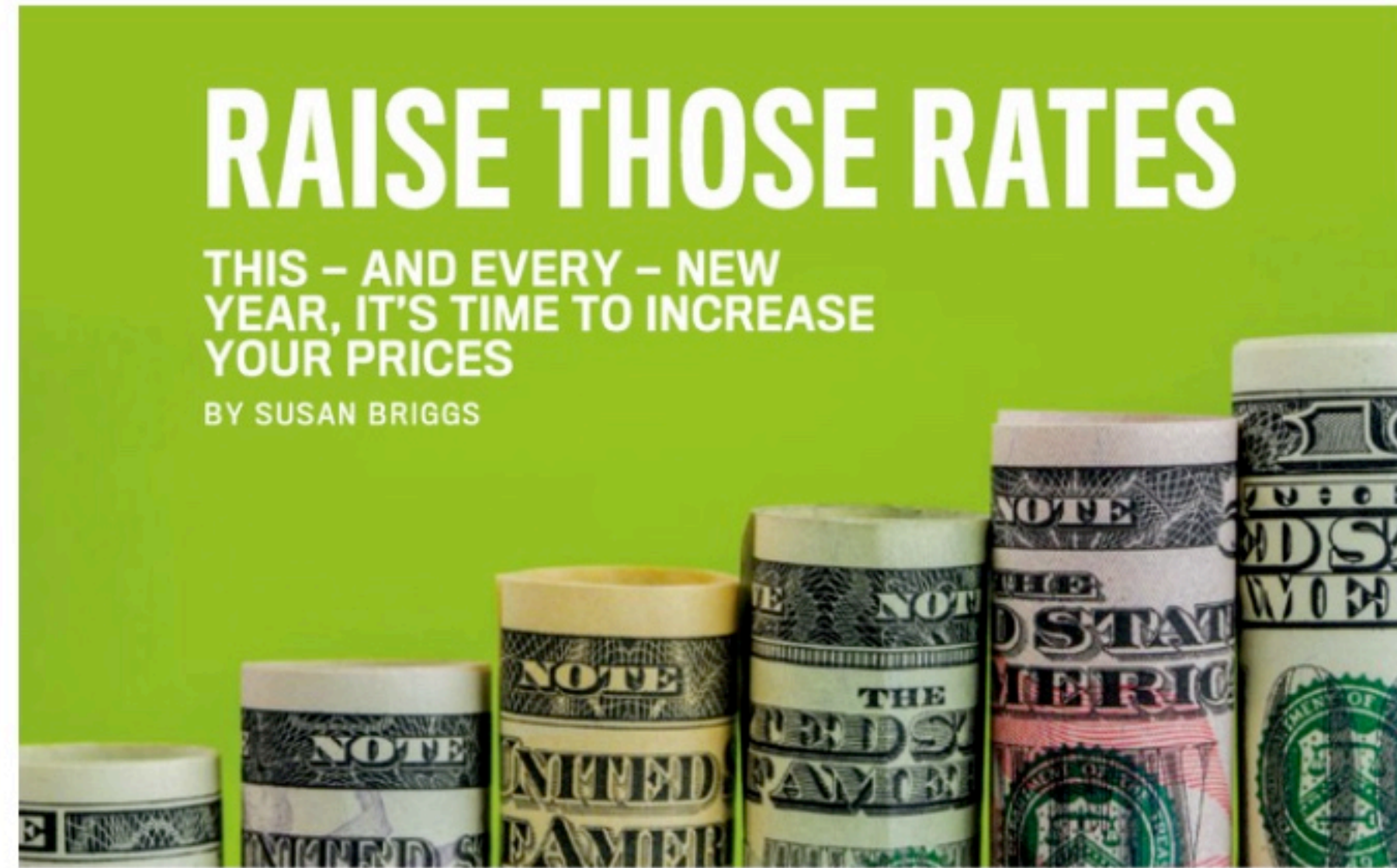
**Mistake #4: They build a brand and then let it stagnate.**

→ If you've avoided Mistake #3 and maintained your brand guidelines for a period of time, eventually your cutting-edge identity will need refreshing. Logo artwork falls out of trend. Store signage fades and needs updating. Advertising campaigns run their course and need a new direction. (Even Met Life finally got rid of their famed Snoopy advertisements just a few months ago.) While the strongest brands might need only subtle changes over the long term, they are still in a constant process of changing and

growing. Working with a knowledgeable pet industry designer can help you navigate this challenge and help your brand mature gracefully.

**Mistake #5: They try to appeal to everyone.**

→ To build the strongest possible brand, start by accepting the fact that you won't appeal to everyone. The brand that connects most strongly with one type of customer is unlikely to connect as strongly with others. Don't weaken your appeal and suck all the personality out of your brand by trying to reach everyone. Pick your niche and target customer, decide on your brand personality, and roll the dice!



BY SUSAN BRIGGS



**SUSAN BRIGGS** is the founder of Crystal Canine, a resource for the pet care industry offering dog daycare expertise, financial management tools, speaking and consulting services. Visit the website at [crystalcanine.com](http://crystalcanine.com)

ONE OF THE BEST pieces of advice I received as a new pet business owner was from a veteran during a trade association meeting. He told me to raise my rates every year. The increase does not need to be big, but consistent increases condition clients to expect rates to change regularly. The best part of this advice was it removed all the angst I previously felt in raising rates.

It's a smart business practice. Every year, we give staff raises and other costs go up. Yet too many pet business owners are reluctant to increase rates. In fact, many owners agonize over the idea. There's fear that clients will get upset or stop coming. And then once the decision is made to raise rates, it's followed by more worrying over how to communicate the increase.

Following a policy of raising at least some rates every year eliminates this emotional strain for you and conditions your clients at the same time. Wear your business owner hat and create a system for reviewing rates and communicating changes every year.

Keep in mind that your clients want you to stay in business and care for their pets. They trust you, appreciate the service value and will accept rate changes every year.

You do not have to increase all rates each year if you offer multiple services. One way to soften the impact is to announce adjustments two to four weeks in advance or set a time period for clients to lock in existing rates by pre-purchasing a package.

If you have certain months when

cash flow is low, this might be when you announce future rate adjustments and boost package sales. Select a time each year to evaluate rates using this easy step-by-step system.

**Step 1:** Create a rate roster spreadsheet with all the services you offer and your current rate for each.

**Step 2:** Highlight your key services — the ones that generate over 50 percent of your revenue (e.g., dog daycare, lodging, dog training).

**Step 3:** Perform a pricing analysis to see how much each service contributes to business profits.

**Step 4:** Prioritize the key service rate to increase in current year. Update your rate roster with new rate and date.

**Step 5:** Review secondary service categories in the rate roster and select one or more categories to increase in current year (e.g., lodging activities, bath rates, etc.). Update your rate roster with new rates and date.

**Step 6:** Establish an implementation and client communication plan that offers advance notice or package sales.

**Step 7:** Next year, repeat the process and increase a different key service and other service category. Your rate roster provides a history of your rates and increases so it's easy to see which areas are due for an adjustment.

You can increase revenue without raising rates by reducing available discounts. Once you implement your rate change, monitor feedback. Remember, it's OK to receive a few complaints. If no one complains, you probably did not adjust your rates high enough. Focus on providing high quality pet care and customer service and your clients will happily pay a little more to keep their pet healthy, safe and happy.

ASK PETS+



**How can I bring attention to the plight of endangered dogs at open-admission animal shelters in my community?**

→ A recent headline from France offers an idea. Remi Gaillard, a French comedian known

for his "Jackass"-style video pranks, announced in November that he would be locking himself in a cage at a local dog kennel until all of the kennel's 300 dogs were adopted or he raised \$50,000 in donations. Hmm, do you know any local celebrities who love animals? Ask them

if they're willing to be caged for a day (or two) to help endangered canines. While this can work with any level of celebrity, the bigger the name, the better the idea will perform. (Although someone with a big and enthusiastic local social media following could also work well.)

**Private pet-sitting services like Rover.com and Dogvacay.com are becoming more and more popular in my market. How can I compete?**

→ When the internet attacks a business model, the only thing you can do is double down on

the quality of your service. In this case, your specific goal should be to increase the feeling of security pet parents feel when dealing with you. Start by showcasing the education and training of your staff members. Create a detailed and easily understandable presentation of your facility's

safety features. Add client reviews and video testimonials. Offer a live feed from your location. Last but not least, create a FAQ that answers any questions that pet owners might have about your pet boarding/sitting service.

**I'm seeing more cars wrapped in promotional messages, and want to do my own to promote my cat grooming service. What will it cost?**

→ Creating your own Fluffy Mobile? Nice. The gurus at BuyerZone say that "cast vinyl" wraps

(designed to last a year or longer) for cars and SUVs should run between \$2,000 and \$3,000 including installation. (Rates will vary based on your vehicle size and location.) Shorter-term "calendared vinyl" installations can be 40 percent cheaper, but since you'll

probably be keeping your message on your car for a long time, ignore this option. For inspiration, search Pinterest. Then invest in having your design professionally done. Last but not least, make sure your URL and phone number are easily visible in your design.

