



How to Give Your Franchise a Personal Touch

Making your franchise location stand out from the rest may be as easy as providing stellar customer service or adopting social media techniques to speak directly with customers.

By Darren Dahl | Nov 22, 2010

As a rule, entrepreneurs tend to be independent thinkers. That can often be a real strength in persevering against the myriad of challenges involved in building a business. But, when an entrepreneur makes the decision to become a franchisee, they need to curtail some of that independent spirit since they are now part of a bigger organization.

What that means, then, is that you often need to get approval before you take action on any wild new plans, such as changing the color scheme of the franchise brand. "We walk a fine line between squelching the creativity and ingenuity of franchisees and protecting the integrity of our brand," says David Lewis, the head of franchising at Express Employment Professionals, a staffing firm with some 600 franchised locations. "We encourage our franchisees to express their personality without changing the core branding. Some owners in our system choose to set up their offices with traditional desks and chairs in the lobby. Others may go for hip and funky vibe. That's okay too. But our blue logo just wouldn't look right in purple just as the golden arches wouldn't be the same in pink."

The good news is that there are many ways that entrepreneurs can express their creativity and still enjoy all the benefits that come from being a franchisee. The key, says Lewis, is to get approval from your franchisor ahead of time so that you can get their support, such as extra marketing muscle, behind it. "Franchisors want to incorporate the best practices of franchisees," he says. "But if it isn't in the best interest of the organization, you risk damaging your relationship by making changes in secret. View the relationship as a partnership and your franchisor should too."

Given that advice, here are some examples of how entrepreneurs can successfully personalize their franchise.

How to Give Your Franchise a Personal Touch: Give it Some Local Flavor

When Natasha Nelson founded Yogurtini, a self-serve frozen yogurt restaurant in Tempe, Arizona, she offered a variety of flavors like green tea or acai as well as toppings such as frozen brownie bites and jalapenos that she figured would appeal to the local students from Arizona State University. But now that she has turned into a franchisor, with three franchisees and five more in the works, she knows that her franchisees need to offer popular flavors based on where they are located. "What is popular in our Tempe location may not be as popular in our Kansas City store, which is based in a residential mall and serves mostly moms and their kids," says Nelson. "So although we have approved flavors, we definitely want them to figure out what is going to sell in their area based on things like the location, the weather or the clientele."

Similarly, Jeni Garrett, CEO of the Victoria, Texas-based Woodhouse Day Spa, a business with 23 franchises, says that franchisees are given "local options" over the kinds of inventory they carry in their spas. "We have our core and optional Woodhouse approved lines and then they can submit local options to us for approval," says Garrett, who expects the company to grow to 125 locations over the next five years.

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How to Give Your Franchise a Personal Touch: Knock Their Socks Off

One of the most straightforward aspects any franchisees can personalize about his or her business is the service. "Knocking customers' socks off with superior or friendlier service than they find elsewhere is probably the best and most rewarding way to personalize a franchise," says Reid Neubert, a marketing and branding expert based in San Rafael, California. "Being proactive where appropriate and following up in a personal way are unexpected and welcome customer service improvements." Neubert says that you can also make the business as welcoming as possible – such as focusing on neatness, cleanliness, decor, holiday decorations, landscaping, etc. – as long as what you do adheres to the franchise brand guidelines.

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How to Give Your Franchise a Personal Touch: Run a Campaign

Most franchisors encourage their franchisees to come up with creative ways to market their product or service. For example, one Express franchisee handed out gifts to potential clients that corresponded with the Twelve Days of Christmas, a campaign that eventually went national. "It wasn't a fancy idea, but it works really well," says Lewis. "Case in point, we have had 1,500 similar campaigns ordered by franchisees for this holiday season."

Similarly, a Yogurtini franchisee ran a promotion in partnership with a Victoria's Secret where customers who donated a piece of clothing received a 20 percent discount on the frozen yogurt. "Our franchisees are the experts in their local markets and we want to give them a say in how they reach out to their customers," says Nelson.

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How to Give Your Franchise a Personal Touch: Hold an Event

Just Between Friends, a leading children's and maternity franchise with 112 locations in 22 states, is based on the idea that each franchisee will hold two sales events a year - once in spring and once in fall - where local families act as consignors and sharing in the profits. "We encourage our franchisees to put their personal touch on their events in order to be successful in their city or community," say Shannon Wilburn and Daven Tackett, co-founders of the company. "From choosing their own local charity partner to targeting their promotions to their community to their pricing for admission fees, adding that 'personal touch' definitely helps each franchisee succeed."

For example, Tracey Gifford, who owns a Just Between Friends franchise in Denver, calls her sales events a "Kids Gear and Clothing Sale" instead of a "Children's Maternity Consignment Event" to better connect with local customers. "Gear is a common term in Denver since sports and outdoor activities are big here," she says. "In our marketing and PR we also focus on the green aspect of the event. That is what appeals to people in Denver."

Joanie Morrison and Pam Willingham, who are Just Between Friends franchisees in Fort Worth, Texas, personalized their annual sale by raising the price of the fee early-bird shoppers pay, to \$10, up from the \$1 or \$5 similar events charge. "We are already the biggest event in Texas and a lot of people that shop our sale do so because they like going to the biggest event," say Morrison and Willingham. "So we focus on making sure we have the biggest and best selection above all else. Even though we took the risk of raising our price, people couldn't give us their money fast enough because they are willing to pay to shop the biggest event."

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How to Give Your Franchise a Personal Touch: Connect with Your Community

Active community involvement is one of the best ways to 'personalize' your franchised business," says Daniel Durney, co-founder PowerHouse Franchising, a franchise consulting business in Mesa, Arizona. "If you look for ways to volunteer, sponsor or participate with various community-based events, you build local friendships, give back to the community that supports your specific location and often generate very positive PR."

Durney points to the national franchise, Massage Envy, as a model example of how individual locations hold community-specific events. For instance, one franchisee in Fairfield, Connecticut, partners with St. Vincent's Medical Center to offer digital breast cancer screenings via a mobile mammogram unit and holds a raffle in partnership with other local businesses.

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How to Give Your Franchise a Personal Touch: Express Yourself Online

The rise of social media tools available to business owners such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs has given franchisees a whole roster of new options to connect with their customers on a personal level. "Our franchisees blog and create a personalized, mom-and-pop feel to their business by blogging about their projects, Facebooking with photos of wraps and tweeting about their new deals, clients and prospects," says Mike Enos, owner of Fast Wrap USA, a company with 60 franchises that offers mobile wrapping for foreclosed homes, stalled construction projects and weatherization for boats and other recreational vehicles. "This way, clients and prospects can stay in engaged with the day-to-day workings of the business and they feel like they have a more personal relationship with the business owner."

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