

5

*secrets*

TO UNCOVER YOUR

**VISUAL  
IDENTITY**

NATASHA LAKOŠ



## *i·den·ti·ty:*

the condition of being oneself, and not another;  
the sense of self, providing continuity in personality over time

*synonyms: individuality, personality, distinctiveness, uniqueness.*



“

THE BETTER YOU KNOW  
*yourself,*  
THE BETTER YOUR RELATIONSHIP  
WITH THE REST OF THE  
*world.*

– *Toni Collette*

1

# *Know Thyself*

In my experience, it's the clients who know the answer to these three things who end up with the most magnetic brand:

- who you are
- who you serve (and how you help them)
- what you stand for

It's as simple as this: **True individual style is the by-product of self-awareness.**

So, what are you up to in the world?

Do you have a zinger of a cocktail line, or an elevator pitch you can't wait to share?

Or is this all a bit of a fuzzy concept right now? Is it changing?

Regardless of where you are...I urge you to feel into the answers before you embark on your design journey.

*Here are some prompts to help you explore...*

## **Who are you?**

- What role do you play?
- Are you a provocateur? A storyteller? A healer? An instigator?
- What's your story (today)?

## **Who do you serve?**

- Who are you speaking to?
- Who's your ideal client avatar? What's his/her name, age, income, location...what are his/her dreams, ambitions, biggest challenges, fears? What's the problem they wake up with every day or go to bed thinking

about at night?

- What can you do for these people and their mission? How does your unique talent, service(s), product(s) make the world a better place?
- Basically: what are your people's problems and how can you solve them?

#### **What do you stand for?**

- What's your gift to the world? Your burning desire? Your stake in the ground?
- What's the big WHY behind your work?

#### **What I learned about this early on:**

Clients who engage in the design process without a clear understanding of the above points inevitably struggle with the design process. The confusion shows early on. They struggle with giving clear feedback, they request an excessive amount of revisions, they tend to look too much to other people in their industry...the list goes on and on. This can cause frustration on both sides of the design team.

For me, the worst part of this is that I know that you as a client are not getting a visual identity that truly captures your brilliance, or the value you have to offer the world. There are too many brands out there that are vague, generic, or (worse yet) misleading.

Under deadlines this confusion can lead to anxiety, pressure, panic and therefore less than stellar results. In short, you end up spending more time and money than necessary – and selling yourself short. Not to mention design should be a helluva lot more fun, and powerful.

#### **Have you worked with designers who just don't "get" you?**

If so, I'd ask how clear you are on these three points. And have you communicated your answers clearly to your designer? The better you know yourself, the easier it will be for you and your designer to make the appropriate choices. You'll both have more clarity around how you should represent yourself.

#### **A note of caution:**

As a designer, I want my clients to get the most out of the investment they've made in me, and in their business. I charge for the value of my work which includes my expertise and years of experience. I want to be able to do the best job possible for them, and I work with what they've given me. When clients come to the table clear on these points, they get the most of the skill,

time and talent of their designer.

Not all designers or web developers feel this way - some are happy to keep sending you iterations and changing things on your site as long as they're getting paid hourly - so note that if you're paying for design or programming this way, it's even more to your advantage to give your designer the best direction you can, from the start. And to source a talented designer who's interested in showcasing your unique voice.

Put the work in now and it will pay off. Self-knowledge = Power.



KNOWING  
*yourself,*  
IS THE BEGINNING OF  
*all wisdom.*

*- Aristotle*

---

#### **ASSIGNMENT**

---

Journal on these questions...or, take them to tea with a friend and get them to ask you...

- Who am I today?
- Who am I serving and what can I do for them?
- What do I stand for? What's the big why behind my work?

*If you're doing this with a friend, remember to record the convo on your phone so you can capture what comes up!*

“

*Accept  
who you are,*

AND

*revel*

IN IT.

*- Mitch Albom*

2

## *And to Thine Own Self Be True*

Set yourself up for success.

As yourself, “Do my answers ring true for me, today?”  
Am I stuck in an old image of myself? Is it what's expected of me? What I'm already known for? What I think “works” in the market? Am I borrowing from someone else's established identity?

Be honest with yourself and the world and it will catapult your business forward in unexpected and delightful ways.

You'll have more ease (and fun!) in your work, and amazingly, the right people will show up at your door. It's easy to lust after someone else's branding, or to be pulled off-course by a new design trend.

We're all unique, with the potential to be fascinating. And so it has to be said that your own unique identity is waiting to be revealed. I would say that the more unique (*read: different*) you are – the more you'll stand out, in a great way. The fact is we're *all* unique, so I believe it's actually the people who have the guts to reveal who they truly are, who stand out.

There is enough same-ness in the world. We want to embrace you for who you are. Dr. Seuss said it well: “There is no one alive that is you-er than you.” Let's celebrate that.

**“The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.”**

*– Joseph Campbell*

### **Why is this so hard?**

It can be tempting to gloss over these question (especially when you need to get your website up "yesterday!"). And when we do, it costs us down the road - in time, money, satisfaction, growth, and lost potential.

It sometimes takes more time than we thought to find answers, especially if we haven't checked in with ourselves in a while. We're changing, all the time. We're inspired, growing, and our businesses are growing right along with us. Sometimes we forget to let the people around us know. And sometimes identity work stirs up "stuff" for us. It takes time for reflection, exploration, honesty and courage - we're called to face the fear of putting our true selves "out there".

**"Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakens."**

– Carl Jung

### **As it relates to marketing:**

For people to buy from you, they need to relate to you, to have what you say resonate with them. This is key to branding. You want to come across as reliable, and a major part of this is consistency. From your perspective, it will feel like repetition. You are familiar with how and where you show up in the world. But you never know how or where someone is coming across you for the first time. Tell people who you are again, and again.

Brands that reach "Coca-Cola" status, or have been around for decades, can switch things up. When you're starting out, you want to create recognition and give people a sense of confidence in your brand. You want to have people get the sense that you're going to do what you say you will. As creatives, we can be tempted to switch things up. So the key is to create an identity you're excited about and proud of – one that rings true. So that you can show up again, and again. As you and your business grow, so will your identity - but the key elements will likely be there throughout everything if they are a true reflection of who you are.

### **Love note from Natasha:**

We all have moments of "this has been done before", or "this is how it should be done". We see what works for other people. Or we may ask "Who am I to do this?". Let's break out of the tunnel vision, and comparison mode. **Everything's been done before but no one can do it like you.**

### **A note about copy-cattery and the sometimes incestuous nature of online marketing:**

As a creative myself, and as someone who's been at the helm of other people's online identities, I have to say that most people who get imitated rarely see it as "the sincerest form of flattery".

There are trends in graphic and web design: color schemes, typefaces, graphic elements, etc. And there is a creative consciousness we all share. Having said that, we need to do our best to be as conscious as we can, and to respect creative work. We need to realize that other businesses (which are actually people like you and me) own their designs. Copyright law aside, it's just bad karma to copycat.

Trust that we all have the potential to be just as admired as the colleagues and leaders we revere. Let's not be too scared, or lazy, to step out as who we are even if that's different, or if it takes time and money (great design usually does).



***Be  
yourself,***

EVERYONE ELSE  
IS ALREADY TAKEN.

– Oscar Wilde

---

### **ASSIGNMENT**

---

Ask yourself:

- In what ways is my online identity representative of my true gifts?
- In what way is it straying from my unique voice or vision?
- Is there a one-of-a-kind element to draw people in, through words, photography, graphics?

“

EVERY  
*object,*  
EVERY  
*being,*

IS A JAR FULL OF DELIGHT.

BE A  
*connoisseur.*

- *Rumi*

3

## *Pay Attention*

**Look at everything.** Color combinations when you're at the farmers market. Album artwork for the latest pop icon. The composition of a classical garden. Notice what you love.

You don't have to question why you're drawn to it. That might be immediately clear, but sometimes there's something under the surface we can't quite articulate yet. Don't get stuck on that - if it makes you stop and stare (or listen, or feel) capture it.

Themes will probably start to emerge, like: the emotion behind something, the experience it gives you. Or characteristics like proportion, shape, color, texture. How that relates to your visual brand can be interpreted by a talented designer.

When inspiration strikes in your daily life, take note! Grab a photo or a screenshot, make a note, create an inspiration file wherever is easiest for you (Evernote, Pinterest, magazine tears in a file folder). Visual references are a fantastic way to communicate style. Everyone interprets words such as "contemporary" a little bit differently. The less ambiguity, the better - as we know, a picture says a thousand words.

Look outside your industry! Pay attention to the music that inspires you, movies, fine art, food, packaging, fashion, the animal world, nature...the world around us is rich with inspiration. Great ideas are waiting for you beyond the computer screen. It's convenient to troll the internet looking at online entrepreneurs or re-pinning images - and that can be helpful. But a unique ID is inspired by the bigger world you're a part of, what moves

you, and by your unique viewpoint.

What are your passions? Your philosophies on life? Bring these into your business.



WHEREVER  
***you look,***  
THERE'S SOMETHING  
***to see.***

*- Anonymous*

**Do visuals trip you up? Try these Qs...**

**What would your company car be?**

A burnt orange echo friendly sedan or the latest model Porsche, in high gloss black?

**Who would be your celebrity spokesperson, if you could afford anyone?**

Meryl Streep or Jack Black?

**What's the tone of the copy you're drawn to?**

Is it crisp and professional or warm and fuzzy with a bit of sass?

**The clients and customers who adore you – what would they say about your style?**

No idea? Ask them! Answers may surprise and delight you.

**If your business was a city...**

...would it be London, or Santa Fe?

**One-on-one with Natasha: mining for the gold.**

I ask my clients questions like the ones above in my Identity Investigation Questionnaire, a survey I send clients before we start our work together. If you and I were live on Skype right now, going over your answers, the thing I'd be most curious to know, the follow up question I'd ask you behind every one of your answers is WHY.

For instance, you could say "London" to the city question above, and I might think "traditional, classic, heritage" - but you might explain that you're in love with London's punk underground, the way the city embraces futuristic architecture, and that it's a cultural melting pot. Which would give me a very different and distinct design direction. Asking why will get you to dig deeper and reveal interesting insight that will be pure gold for the design process.

---

## ASSIGNMENT

---

In addition to asking yourself the questions above, make a commitment to collect a piece of inspiration every day this week. Document it with your phone. This will force you to pay attention during the day - and likely to places and things that might normally pass you by.

“

*Simplicity*  
IS THE ULTIMATE  
*sophistication.*

- *Leonardo da Vinci*

4

## *Edit* *(edit, edit).*

It's the secret to a great wardrobe, a home that belongs in a design magazine, and an enviable visual identity.

Style makers yield this secret weapon with swift precision and skill. The secret they know is that sometimes adding can actually detract. Fashion designer Coco Chanel is known for having said "Elegance is refusal". She also advised women: "Before you leave for the day...take one thing off." She knew the secret to not letting excess detract from beauty.

We only get a few seconds to make a great impression. Make it easy for your message to land. We can all agree that brevity is a form of respect and I think this applies to visuals as well. Don't mistake refinement for simplicity. Think Apple. Restraint oozes confidence. It's sexy. And attractive.

"Be bright, be brief, be gone." as I once heard it said. Leave them wanting more.

**For those just aching to fill that white space:**

Negative space is a valuable design element, not an empty void waiting to be filled, or wasted space. It's valuable real estate just as it is - breathing room. A client of mine put it so well: "white space lets the wholeness breathe through".

Think of visiting a pristine white art gallery, where all the attention is where it belongs - on the art. Or stepping into a minimalist zen spa, doesn't that feel great? Imagine a chic designer showroom where only the essential,

the beautiful, and the coveted holds space. In these environments, we get the feeling that we're in for something special. We can relax. We feel taken care of.

What if everything your customers came in contact with felt like that? What if when they visited your site it felt like a temple for your content, your message, your wisdom, your gift? Think about how you want people to feel when they experience your brand.



KEEP IT  
*simple,*  
SWEETHEART.



– *Anonymous*

---

## ASSIGNMENT

---

Take a look at your current online presence.

- What could it do without?
- What might be detracting from the main offers that you want people to notice / buy?
- Are there things on your Home page that you could move elsewhere on your site?
- Are there things there that might be leading people off your site altogether (these should be the first to go!)

“

THE  
*extravagant  
gesture*  
IS THE VERY STUFF  
OF  
*creation.*

- *Annie Dillard*

5

## *Fast Forward*

For a few minutes, consider where you want to go with your business.

Now imagine if you could just flip a switch and be there, without all the steps you think you need to “get” there.

Where would that be?

Consider designing your visual identity for where you're GOING, not where you are today.

We've all heard it - perception is greater than reality. Design influences the way you and your business are perceived. It's an amazing tool. Put that power to use.

Something amazing happens when we step into a new role. Not only do others see us in a different light, we see ourselves in a new light. And we rise to the occasion. We “act as if” into a new reality.

There is no quicker way to get people to see you the way you want to be seen (including yourself) than to position yourself as if you're already there. Act as if you're there now. It may happen faster than you think. Amazing things happen when we stop acting small and step into the role we're meant to play.



**Be**  
THE WOMAN  
(OR MAN)  
**you want**  
TO BE.

— *Diana Vreeland*

---

**ASSIGNMENT**

---

Think big picture. If your business was a major success (whatever that means for you) TODAY...

- Who would you be on par with?
- How would you represent yourself?
- What would your photography look like?
- What would your Home page look like?
- What would the overall look and feel of your online presence be?



I'd love to hear how this guide helped you!  
Comment, ask a question, or like my Facebook page [here](#).  
You can also connect with me on **Twitter** and **Pinterest**.  
These days, I'm crushin' on **Instagram**, you can follow me [here](#).

If you're interested in working with me, swing by my virtual atelier:  
[natashalakos.com](http://natashalakos.com), where you can check out my signature service,  
the **VIP (Visual Identity Package)**.

With so much love,