

# **IndieAuthor Guide To Creating Your Brand**

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of indie authorship, what is a “brand” and why do you need one? Your brand is the name that stands for the public image encompassing both you, the author, and the body of work affiliated with that name. For most writers the name will be the same as that listed on their books for “author”, but it can also be an alias or company name. Establishing a known, consistent and reliable brand is key to marketing success, regardless of what you’re selling, and it’s a big mistake to think marketing products like detergent and soda pop is all that different from marketing books and authors.

A brand becomes a placeholder in the consciousness of the customer, a bucket containing all the good or bad associations, opinions and factual observations the customer has come to connect with a given product line. Consider Ben and Jerry’s™ ice cream. The Ben and Jerry’s™ name typically calls to mind premium ingredients, wild flavor combinations, and socially-conscious executives. Ben and Jerry’s™ products are also known to be more expensive than supermarket ice creams, but this is an acceptable trade-off for fans of the brand. Now take the example of author Terry Pratchett. Common ideas about his work, and by extension about Mr. Pratchett himself, are fantasy, dark humor, imagination, whimsy and a touch of the philosophical. These associations are so strong that when a new Pratchett book comes out, many people will buy it without having any idea of the plot or characters, on the strength of the Pratchett reputation alone. Each new book that delivers on the promise of that reputation further solidifies the brand and serves as cross-promotion for every other book Pratchett has written in the past or will come to write in the future.

Conversely, readers who don’t care for dark humor and whimsy in their fantasy books know to avoid Pratchett’s work. It seems counterintuitive, but this helps the author as well. Readers whose tastes don’t align well with Pratchett’s brand will not enjoy his books, and if they buy one with unrealistic expectations they will go on to become dissatisfied customers. Dissatisfied customers tend to share their dissatisfaction with everyone they know, and bad word of mouth has a way of spreading.

### 2. SHOULD YOUR NAME BE YOUR BRAND?

The answer to this question is, “It depends.” It depends on you, your work, your past history, your current life situation, and the life situation you hope to have in the future.

The “you” part of the equation comes down to your tolerance for fame, however small or large that fame may be. Remember that if you use your real name as your brand name, not only you, but your relatives, friends and even hometown may one day come to national media attention. For many writers this is entirely welcome, and in fact the ultimate goal. For others, it's far preferable to have one persona for public consumption and another for private life.

If you're writing a tell-all type of book, or a fictionalized memoir in which your thinly-veiled characters are based on real people who may be recognized by readers (regardless of their phony names and the way you altered their physical descriptions), using a pen name is your safest bet. Outside these narrow circumstances, the “your work” part of the equation comes into play primarily when there's something about it that could be controversial, as you'll see in the following examples.

For instance, suppose a former child star from a squeaky-clean family sitcom now writes gory crime thrillers. If he wants to leave his former, child-star persona intact, or if he worries people may not take him seriously as a writer because they've pigeonholed him as an actor, the author should publish under a different name. However, if he wants to capitalize on his fame and create buzz from the shock value of turning his former image on its ear, publishing under his celebrity name will accomplish his goals.

Also consider any existing body of work. Having a series of finance books in print under your real name may nudge you in the direction of taking a pen name for publication of fiction. Conversely, if you've got a few volumes of arty poetry in print and now want to turn your efforts toward writing books about tax law, establishing a separate brand for your new line may be a good idea because people don't generally look to poets for advice about tax law.

Look at your current circumstances as well. If you're a grammar school teacher, publishing a series of steamy, borderline erotica romances under your real name is a bad idea. Similarly, if you live in a very small community where everyone knows everyone else, you may not welcome the notoriety that comes with having published anything provocative or controversial. Consider the general character of your community, and whether your friends and neighbors might feel what you've written reflects negatively on them or the community in any way. If you have children, consider any possible impact your work may have on them.

Finally, think about your future. If you hope to someday occupy a spot in the public eye for anything other than your writing (i.e., public office, acting, singing, etc.), or hold a position of authority over children (i.e., Scout leader, cheerleading coach, middle school teacher), consider how your published work will be viewed in the future.

### 2.1. YOU VERSUS YOUR BRAND NAME

First, the usual caveat: I am not, nor have I ever been, a lawyer, and nothing in this Guide should be construed as professional legal advice. If you have any questions or concerns about publishing under a name other than your legal name, please consult an attorney.

However, one thing I *can* tell you is this: if you choose to publish under a brand name that is not the same as your legal name, which is also known as taking a "pen name," you are still required to conduct all financial and legal business under your real, legal name. In other words, when Sting files his taxes, signs contracts, applies for a passport, receives his earnings from the record label or reports his earnings to the government, he does so under his legal name, "Gordon Sumner". Likewise, the man known to readers as "Mark Twain" was known to the U.S. government as Samuel Clemens. If you attempt to conduct financial or legal business of any sort under a pen name, you will run afoul of the authorities.

### 3. CHOOSING YOUR BRAND

There are many things to consider in choosing your brand name, even if you've elected to go with your real name or some variation of it.

#### 3.1. WHAT'S IN A NAME?

When marketing types come up with new brand names, they try to convey some sense of the product line, or some favorable associations, through that name. For example, Mr. Clean™ evokes the image of an efficient and polite cleaning expert who's very serious about his job. An author's brand name doesn't have to convey anything about the content of her books, but it shouldn't clash with them, either. If your name naturally evokes certain feelings or ideas, think about how well those feelings or ideas mesh with the work you intend to publish. "Bambi Waverly" would be a good fit for romance, children's books or fantasy, and is probably fine for general fiction as well, but may not convey the necessary authority desirable in nonfiction reference, nor the sobriety the author may be aiming for in literary fiction. In such a case, if the author doesn't want to use a pen name she can go with a variation of her real name, such as "B. Waverly".

#### 3.2. CONSISTENCY IS KEY

Consumers know the Big Mac™ and Quarter Pounder™ are both McDonald's™ products; likewise, you want to make it easy for readers to find all your various works and know they came from the same source. You don't want to publish one book under the brand "Joe Blow", a second under "Joseph B. Blow", a third under "J.B. Blow", and so on. In bookstore listings and library card catalogs, it won't be at all clear that the books were all written by the same person. If you already have books in print and want readers of your new books to know you are also the author of those prior works, you pretty much have to go with the name you used previously.

### 3.2.1. EXCEPTION TO THE CONSISTENCY RULE

There is one exception to the consistency rule: authors who have more than one “product line”. Gothic fiction author Anne Rice has written erotica under the pen name of “A.N. Roquelaure” for example, to keep the two bodies of work separate and distinct from one another. Some authors use one version of their name for nonfiction and another for fiction, so that their reputation as a writer of fiction doesn’t dilute their authority in the world of non-fiction. The respected author of highly technical computer manuals risks being viewed as little more than a goofy fanboy if word gets out that he writes sci-fi novellas on the side.

Think very carefully about what you stand to gain and lose in choosing separate brands for separate “product lines”, however. An author with ten books in print under the same brand has ten promotional tools at his disposal, all of which build up his reputation, with each book acting as a cross-promotional tool for every other book in the line. If that same author published five books under one brand and five under a second brand, he has two separate avenues of promotion but each is only half as powerful as if they were combined into a single line.

And don’t forget, that author has easily twice as much work in keeping the marketing fires stoked for two separate product lines because he must cultivate and maintain two separate brands, and possibly even two separate identities if he intends to give interviews, blog or otherwise communicate with his readership.

### 3.3. KEEP YOUR OPTIONS OPEN

Never forget, your brand will be a constant throughout your career and life, it should not be based on fads or specific reader age demographics. As a twentysomething author of gossipy chick lit, you may find a name like “Snark E. Gurl” very clever and so will your intended audience. But if you hope to have some career longevity as a writer, flash forward another twenty years and see if that name doesn’t sound ridiculous hanging over the head

of a fortysomething author of hen lit or literary fiction. When the day you must switch to a more mature-sounding name inevitably comes, poof! All the promotional and brand-loyalty equity you've built up will vanish.

Also remember, your brand name will be used as a single point of reference to stand for you and your body of work in every venue. Your chosen name will not only appear on book covers, but also in interviews, on web sites and pages, press releases, merchandise related to your books, publicity materials and so forth. If you absolutely hate your middle name, don't make it part of your brand name because you'll have to hear people calling you by that name for the rest of your career.

### **3.4. BEWARE THE COMMON NAME**

Common names like "John Miller," "Susan Wilson," and the like can be easy for your readers to forget because more often than not, they will only remember that the name was "something common, like Smith or Jones." If you want to stand in for the Everyman or Everywoman in your writing, "John Smith" or "Joan Smith" may be a good pen name. Otherwise, you can either choose a pen name totally different from your real name or choose a variant of your real name. "John Miller" could be "J. Lee Miller," and "Susan Wilson" could be "Susan Nicole Wilson," for example.

## **4. THE SAME NAME GAME**

When you've settled on your brand name, do some research to ensure no one else is publishing, or doing anything you find objectionable, under your chosen name. Ideally, you want to be the only one using your chosen brand name in a noticeable way.

First, do a Google search. In my own case, a Google search of "April Hamilton" turned up nearly 5,000 hits, with everyone from an interior designer to a professional soccer player among them. The same search on "April L. Hamilton" returned only references to me, so I chose that variant of my name as my brand name.

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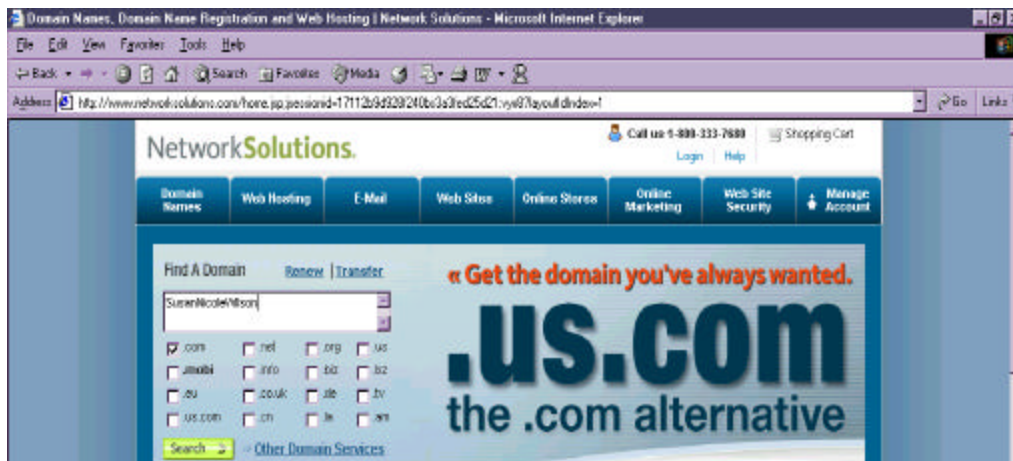
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You don't have to rule out your chosen name if your search turns up just a small number of references to people other than yourself, on two conditions: first, none of them are authors, and second, none of them are doing anything you find objectionable under that name. For example, if you find only one other person listed with your name but that person is on the FBI's most wanted list, you don't want to risk having people confuse you with that other person when they go looking for you online. Likewise, if one of the same-name people is prominently featured on an adults-only website or in embarrassing YouTube videos, it's probably best to go with a variation or a completely different name.

Just to cover all the bases, also do a search on the name at Amazon.com. On the off chance someone else is publishing under your chosen brand name and it's escaped Google's attention, you'll find out about it at Amazon.

### 5. BECOME THE MASTER OF YOUR DOMAIN

Once you've got your name and you're confident you're the only one using it in much of a public way, check its availability as an internet domain. Go to the Network Solutions site (<http://www.networksolutions.com>) and do a domain search on the name you've chosen with a .com extension, as shown in the screen shot below:



If the internet gods are smiling on you, your brand name will be available as a .com domain name, and if it is, immediately reserve that domain name before someone else grabs it.

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Don't make the mistake of taking a .net domain when someone else has the same domain with a .com extension, because in the minds of the general public, everything online has a .com address. Many of those looking for you will end up at that other person's website. This will annoy the people who are looking for you, as well as the owner of that other domain when he starts getting confused emails from people who think he's you, demanding to know why there's nothing about your books on his site.

Even if you don't have the time, skills or funds to set up a website for the foreseeable future, you should still reserve the domain and keep it. Remember how carefully you chose your brand name, how you searched the 'net to make sure your good name wouldn't become wrongly affiliated with some other person? It's a safe bet there's an exotic dancer, drunk frat boy or crazy shut-in out there in the world with your chosen name, and there's nothing stopping them from reserving *your* .com and building a website that will unravel all your due diligence the day their site goes live.

As of this writing it costs only \$36 to reserve a .com domain on a year-to-year basis through Network Solutions, with a downward sliding price scale when you reserve it for more than one year. Going through a hosting service can get you the domain name reservation for free, but you must sign up for fee-based monthly hosting services. You may want to check out some hosting providers and shop around for the best deal, even if you don't intend to build a full-fledged website. If you know anyone who has a website, ask which service he or she uses for hosting, how much it costs, and whether or not the service is satisfactory. If not, you can look for service provider reviews on sites such as CNET.com. As a last resort, you can just Google for "web hosting" and do your own research.

If your chosen brand is not available as a .com, I strongly recommend you choose a different brand name. The existence of a .com website is taken as a sign of "realness" and professionalism in the eyes of the public. Think about it: if you hear about a hot new toy company called 'Whoozit', you'll tend to assume you can go online to the Whoozit.com website to learn more about their products or even order something from them.

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If there is no Whoozit.com website, or if the Whoozit company site address is something like Whoozit.funpages.net, suddenly Whoozit Corp. starts looking a little fly-by-night to you, doesn't it? Don't risk making the same bad impression.