

Dojo Business: Branding Your Dojo

by Corey Guilbault and Chett Rubenstein

September 2004

While it may seem at odds with the traditional aspects of the martial arts, whether you like it or not, marketing your dojo is critical to staying in business. There are a myriad of options out there for getting the word out, from advertising to public demonstrations to creative “guerilla” marketing tactics. Letting people know about your dojo can be achieved through a full spectrum of tools, but with all these options comes the opportunity to waste a lot of money. If your advertising is too generic it gets lost in the shuffle or ignored completely and that’s money out the window. Some advance planning can help you make the most of your marketing budget even if it is very small.

It’s all about brands

Marketing is about brands. Nike, Starbucks, McDonalds, and even the Aikido Association of America can be seen as brands. In short, a brand is a symbol. Symbols, of course, stand for something. For Nike it is athletic empowerment; for Starbucks it is gourmet coffee; and for the Aikido Association of America it is a particular approach to Aikido set down by our founder, Toyoda Shihan.

When considering your dojo, it is good to think of it as a brand as well. Many brands come up with “taglines” they use to describe themselves. “Just do it” (Nike) and “Think Different” (Apple) are two examples. Other brands don’t use taglines per se, but organize all their marketing around a single proposition. Starbucks does not use a tagline, but most people know what that brand is all about.

Before you commit money to advertising your dojo, you will want to figure out what your “tagline” is – even if you don’t plan to use it in your advertising. This exercise is useful because it helps you focus your message and set yourself apart from other offerings in your community (which we cutthroat marketers call ‘competitors’). At Phoenix Aikido we use the tagline “Teaching the Way of Peace” and at Aikido of Norwalk/Yanagi Aikido we use “Traditional Training in the Way of Harmony”. Notice the different messages these send.

What you do not want is a generic message. Thumb through the yellow pages or your local paper. Almost every martial arts studio says the same things; “Learn self defense”, “Improve concentration and discipline”, “Safe training environment”, “Such and such organization sanctioned” or “The only 80th degree black belt in the area.” To a prospect looking for a dojo, these all look basically the same. So now they have to choose randomly or visit each school or try to find the best introductory price offer. Whichever road they choose, the chances of them finding the right fit are average at best.

To compete among all these generic offerings, you need a unique angle. You need to stand for something. Hence you need a “tagline” or point of differentiation – something your dojo, a brand, will stand for among all these other studios. Below are some thoughts on how to figure this out.

Consider Your Offerings

Aikido is different from many other martial arts. There is an ethical component based on compassion for the attacker, which is unusual. There is no competition, no tournaments or trophies. Aikido also doesn't rely on physical strength or unusual flexibility to be affective. All of these things separate Aikido from other martial arts and are potential messages to use in your advertising efforts. Aikido sets itself apart from other martial forms, which is a good first step to setting your dojo apart.

Additionally, your dojo may offer other programs that help define the spirit of the place. If you offer Aikido, karate, kick-boxing and martial-aerobic workouts, your dojo may have more of a fitness and self defense angle to it. If you offer Aikido, Iaido and Zen, it may have more of a traditional Budo quality about it. If you offer Aikido, Shodo, Zen, Ikebana and Chanoyu, your dojo may have more of a cultural flavor to it.

Each suite of offerings will appeal to a different type of student - from the fitness and self-defense oriented, to the self-realization oriented, to the culturally interested. What does your dojo offer? What kind of person or groups of people does it appeal to?

Consider Your Prospects

As important, and possibly even more so, is the type of student you want to attract. If a student is to stay with your program, this program has to fit their needs and ultimately, the long-term students are the ones that help a dojo mature and grow.

There are two types of prospective students – the uneducated and educated. The uneducated come to a dojo with little or no knowledge of the martial arts. They say things like, “Aikido, is that a form of karate?” For this prospect, an explanation of what makes Aikido different from other disciplines is important in helping them evaluate your dojo from the karate studio down the street.

The educated prospect is one who already knows about Aikido. Chances are they have studied a martial art already. Educating them about Aikido's differences is still important, but will not require as much effort. Instead, this student will be more interested in learning about the spirit of your dojo. What makes it different than his/her previous experiences with the martial arts?

This is something to keep in mind when doing advertising. In general-public forums like the newspaper, you may have to focus more on educating prospects about Aikido itself. But for a student who visits the dojo, a brochure that talks a bit more about the spirit of your dojo might help them. After all, they have visited your school and seen Aikido first hand so let them learn about how you run the place.

Tie It all Together

If you think about your dojo's offerings and the types of students it will most appeal to, you will get an idea of how to structure your advertising. Ideally, you want your dojo to come up with a tagline, which is your single-minded point of differentiation. You don't need to use the tagline as such, but it can become a guiding statement that informs all your communications, from advertising to your brochures and Web site. A clear guiding principle also helps your students

work as advertising vehicles. If you can explain to them in a sentence what your dojo is about, they will be able to do the same for their friends.

At Aikido of Norwalk, our tagline “Traditional Training in the Way of Harmony” is meant to convey an ‘un-commercial’ approach to training. We do not offer special promotions, free trials, etc. We also use a very grass roots marketing program wherein each student is responsible for hanging fliers around the community. To date, we don’t do any advertising in newspapers, gaining most of our growth from word-of-mouth and these fliers. Choosing this path has led to slower growth, a sacrifice we were willing to make, but which we have found tends to draw the types of students we want in the dojo. It is a direction that has worked for Aikido of Norwalk – especially in contrast to the multitude of more commercially-inclined martial enterprises in our area. In this sense, not only our advertising message, but even the way we advertise is in keeping with our brand’s point of differentiation.

Conversely, there is another school in the community which has been very aggressive in its advertising. They even do TV commercials! The programs they offer are wide-reaching and fitness/self defense based. Their tagline is simply “Physical Arts” – a definite sign of what the school is all about. They do quite well with this approach, proving that there is room for any angle. The thing to note is that neither of these marketing strategies tries to be all things to all people. Instead, each focuses on a particular audience they feel best equipped to satisfy.

- What does your dojo stand for?
- Who is the type of student you want to attract?
- What needs can your program offerings satisfy?
- What do you want people to think of when they think of your dojo?
- What are your growth ambitions? (This last one is an important reality-check because some strategies have decidedly narrower appeal in our contemporary culture - something to consider if you have rent to pay each month!)

By asking and answering these questions in advance of your advertising, you will be able to craft a message to the community that helps them make an educated decision. Whereas advertising is often seen as an annoying intrusion, done right it can become a “pre-customer service”, helping prospective students make informed decisions which ultimately allow them to find the right fit in an efficient manner. This serves to increase your chances of attracting the caliber of student you want and these students, because they have found the right fit, are more likely to stick around after your 6-week intro course.

A future column in this series will explore the specific details of various advertising options but if you have any questions in the meantime, please feel free to contact Corey at corey@aikidonorwalk.com or Chett at chettr@phoenixaikido.org.

Dojo Business is a series of articles conceived of and written by Corey Guilbault and Chett Rubenstein. Guilbault Sensei is dojo-cho of Aikido of Norwalk (<http://www.aikidonorwalk.com>) and Rubenstein Sensei is dojo-cho of Phoenix Aikido (<http://www.phoenixaikido.org>). With over 40 years of combined business experience, they have expertise in marketing, branding, design, technology, accounting and finance.