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## 5 Things You Need To Do Build A Trusted And Beloved Brand

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*As part of our series about how to create a trusted, believable, and beloved brand, I had the pleasure to interview Marc Middleton, Growing Bolder.*

Marc Middleton is the founder and CEO of Growing Bolder, being one of the leading voices in the active lifestyle movement that is rebranding aging. He has created a multi-platform media brand to inspire, assist, and change the landscape of the 50+ population. A multiple Emmy

Award-winning broadcaster of more than 25 years, Marc was one of the first to recognize the power and influence of the rapidly growing 50+ audience. In 2006, he decided to make a change in creating Growing Bolder, since then growing the network of Growing Bolder to one of the world's largest libraries of active-lifestyle content including Growing Bolder TV and Radio Shows, Magazines, and his best-selling book: Growing Bolder: Defy the Cult of Youth, Live with Passion and Purpose and Rock Stars of Aging.

**Thank you so much for doing this with us! Can you tell us a story about what brought you to this specific career path?**

I was a local sports and news anchor for 20 years in an industry that was rapidly changing. What was once an opportunity to engage in real journalism quickly devolved into a hyper-local crime report — a never-ending parade of convenience store robberies, drug deals gone bad, assaults, murders and home invasions. When I would no longer allow my two young daughters to watch their dad on the nightly news, I knew it was time to leave.

At that very moment, station management shared the results of the latest viewer survey with me. One of the first questions was, “How old are you?” If the answer was over age 55, they discontinued the survey. I knew from previous research that the average age of our viewers was 57, so I asked why we didn't care about the opinions of our average viewers. “It's not that we don't care,” I was told. “Advertisers don't care. We need to focus all our energy on attracting and retaining viewers who are 25 to 54.”

That provided the spark that started it all. I dedicated the better part of the next year to studying demographics and lifestyle trends. I came to believe in the existence of an entirely new life stage supported by science, medicine, technology and lifestyle modification that would ultimately transform everything we thought about aging. The size, wealth and spending habits of those who were in or entering this new life stage were unprecedented and undeniable. I saw this as a significant business opportunity that would allow me to leverage the skills that I had developed in broadcasting to challenge and perhaps help transform the culture of aging worldwide.

In what can only be described as a Growing Bolder moment, I walked into the office of the President and General Manager and resigned; walking away from a glamorous and high-paying job to risk it all and become a first-time, later-in-life entrepreneur.

**Can you share a story about the funniest marketing mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?**

You mean other than creating an ad for our national TV show in which I called public broadcasting, public broadcasting?

As a team of journalists, we understood the value of editorial content marketing. We knew that it was the most efficient way to connect with an audience, build brand and ultimately drive sales. Multiple studies showed that blog content was one of the top inbound marketing drivers and we believed that there was an untapped opportunity to provide a turnkey blogging solution, at no cost, for older adults that have something to say but lacked the knowledge or resources to share it online. The prospect of building, hosting, maintaining and marketing a blog was overwhelming to them.

What if we built a blogging network? What if we aggregated and leveraged those voices to help build our brand? We began soliciting non-bloggers who were interesting in building an online presence. We immediately had more wannabe bloggers than we could handle and began onboarding them as quickly as possible. We built a team of bloggers that knew little to nothing about blogging, uploading photos, writing short descriptions, embedding videos, answering comments and leveraging social media. They had no social media followers and no hesitation in asking for help 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It required a large amount of valuable staff time to manage this initiative and their messaging, in many cases, was so far off-brand that it reinforced the stereotypes that we were trying to erase. In a profane tirade, one of our bloggers actually threatened to beat up someone who left an unfavorable comment.

We've always wanted the Growing Bolder brand to have relevance and resonance to people of all ages, all interests, and all levels of health and fitness. We've always wanted to cast a wide net. What we didn't realize is that you build that kind of breadth one niche at a time and you begin with the early adopters, the self-starters and established influencers; not with those who have to be trained and managed. We thought our blogging team was a brilliant strategy in influencer marketing and consumer generated content. In reality, it was major distraction that stole focus, required valuable staff time, and caused brand confusion. So, yes, we quietly and quickly pulled the plug.

### **What do you think makes your company stand out? Can you share a story?**

Most content produced for an older audience feels, looks and sounds old. It's based upon outdated, ageist stereotypes and alienates not only younger people but also those that that it targets. Most importantly, it's content that actually repels the increasingly valuable age-in market — those aging into senior living communities, Medicare, personal financial planning, functional fitness, lifelong learning, travel, and more.

Growing Bolder is the first and only media company that I know of that consistently produces content that not only appeals to and resonates with the most desirable segment of the 50+ demographic but also to consumers decades younger. This is our secret sauce, our value proposition. We've built a lifestyle brand that appeals to consumers of all ages. We accomplish that through editorial storytelling.

I was a sports anchor for decades and my job, ironically, was to appeal to non-sports fans. Research revealed that hardcore sports fans will watch almost anything that is sports related. The goal was to keep “Mrs. Jones” from going to the kitchen to get a snack when sports came on. What I learned from that experience is that the only piece of content that can appeal to anyone no matter their age, gender, race, religion, sexual preference or socioeconomic status is a well told story. Stories evoke emotion. Emotion connects and sells. Stories are remembered and shared more frequently which is a valuable, implicit endorsement.

One example of this phenomenon is a story that I shot at a masters swimming meet in which four men, all in their 90s, and all dealing with multiple, serious health issues, broke age group world records in three different relays. I didn’t make the story about swimming or world records. I didn’t make it about age. It was about overcoming obstacles and refusing to let life put you on the couch. It was about friendship and community. It was about facing your fears. These are all universal themes that anyone can relate to.

We spent zero dollars promoting or boosting the video and it was viewed online over 7 million times within one week and generated hundreds of thousands of comments from non-swimmers of all ages. It would have cost us over \$200,000 to buy that reach on Facebook. That’s the power of story to build brand and extend reach.

**Are you working on any exciting new projects now? How do you think that will help people?**

We have several exciting initiatives underway. We won American Public Television’s Pitchfest Live!, a national contest to produce a new national program that appeals to audiences of all ages but targets the 50+ audience. Our show, *Growing Bolder’s Launchpad to What’s Next* is based upon the notion that we’re all looking for what’s next in our life. We’re all anxious to live with passion and purpose but we’re worried about failure, running out of money before we run out of time, our overall health, cognitive decline and more.

Taped in front of a sell-out crowd, *Launchpad* inspires the kind of lifestyle change that empowers healthy aging and features an all-star team of national experts including long distance swimming icon Diana Nyad; longevity expert Dr. Roger Landry; personal finance guru Jean Chatzky; Blue Zones founder Dan Buettner; 3-time Olympic Gold Medalist Rowdy Gaines; 50+ lifestyle expert Barbara Hannah Grufferman; Rock and Roll Hall of Famer Roger McGuinn; aging transformation icon Dr. Bill Thomas; and personal transformation expert Dr. Jim Smith Jr.

In addition to airing on national television, we’ve created a live version of the show that we’re taking on a national tour to select cities.

I'm also excited about two other projects that we're launching in 2020. One is in partnership with the National Senior Games and has the potential to transform the daily lives of older adults worldwide in a unique way. The other is the most ambitious intergenerational membership organization ever created.

**Ok let's now jump to the core part of our interview. In a nutshell, how would you define the difference between brand marketing (branding) and product marketing (advertising)? Can you explain?**

Brand is the foundation upon which your entire business is built. It's who you are. It's what you stand for. It's your most valuable asset. Brand is about a higher purpose. It's aspiration wrapped in near spiritual pursuit.

Advertising is about driving a transaction. It's creativity wrapped into a call to action. Advertising is a tool that can be used to build brand but mostly it's used to sell stuff.

Everything we do is pushed through our brand filter. Does it fit? Does it support the Growing Bolder ethos? Can we defend it? If not, we don't do it. We don't take any risks with brand marketing.

Advertising is more trial and error, especially on social media where our budgets are typically very small. As long as our product marketing reflects and supports our overall brand, we're not only willing but anxious to take risks in order to see what works.

**Can you explain to our readers why it is important to invest resources and energy into building a brand, in addition to the general marketing and advertising efforts?**

If you build a brand properly, it's your best, most reliable and cost-effective spokesperson. Brand works 24/7 and is always on point. It's the most powerful form of shorthand you have. In a word, a slogan, a logo, or a color palette, brand effectively encapsulates what teams of writers, producers, and editors strive to accomplish with sometimes elaborate and expensive ads, commercials and campaigns. All the marketing and advertising in the world can't make up for a bad brand.

Good advertising sells product, Good branding opens doors to nearly limitless opportunity.

**Can you share 5 strategies that a small company should be doing to build a trusted and believable brand? Please tell us a story or example for each.**

## **1: Leverage the “Someone Like Me” effect.**

We’ve learned that we can share compelling statistics, incontrovertible research or the opinion of renowned experts but the only thing that results in personal transformation is when we can see ourselves in others. It’s the example of an ordinary person living in a way that we aspire to that not only makes us believe it’s possible but also gives us the motivation to try. Consequently we’ve built our brand by looking for and sharing those stories.

My favorite example begins with 100-year-old Ida Keeling who ran in a special 100-meter dash at big track meet — setting a new world record for women 100–104. Video of her run went viral and 100-year-old Ella Mae Colbert, who had never ran a race in her life, thought, “Maybe I can do that too.” Three weeks later, Ida stepped onto the track in South Carolina and ran 30-seconds faster than Ida did. Video of Ella Mae’s run went viral and 101-year-old Julia “Hurricane” Hawkins was inspired to enter the National Masters Championship where she broke the world age group record by over 6 seconds. Suddenly, the hottest division in track and field was women age 100–104 all because ordinary people were exposed to examples of something they hadn’t thought of or didn’t think was possible.

Not only are we inspired by “someone like me”, we trust “someone like me.” In fact, we now trust the opinions of others that we can relate to more than the opinions of experts. We trust the unsolicited recommendation of a complete stranger more than we do advertising. Always be looking for and empowering brand ambassadors.

## **2: Embrace your small size and small (or non-existent) advertising budget.**

Larger competitors, encumbered with multiple layers of decision-making, typically can’t react to opportunity as quickly and decisively as you can. Embrace a ready, fire, aim approach to marketing. Without extensive and expensive market research and focus groups, it’s impossible to know exactly how a new product, service or campaign will be received. Launch new initiatives as early as possible and then rapidly adjust as the market provides direction. It’s a faster path to a better result. Calculated, strategic risk taking has always been and always will be the path to success.

Sometimes not having a big budget (or any budget at all) is a blessing in disguise. I built the first version of our website in my living room after teaching myself how to use Dreamweaver. I couldn’t afford to hire a graphic artist so I taught myself how to use Photoshop and for years did all of the graphic design work for Growing Bolder.

This necessity has required that I think far more deeply about brand than many founders or CEO’s. It’s given me a vocabulary and the ability to communicate more clearly with web

developers, copywriters and graphic designers. It's made me more aware of new and developing trends. It's made me consider how every decision we make and every act we take impacts brand.

### **3: Unless budget is no object, stick with actual words when choosing a brand name.**

There are many successful companies that are built upon made-up, nonsensical brand names that mean nothing until they assign meaning. The problem is that assigning meaning requires an enormous marketing and advertising budget and flawless execution.

A good test is to imagine a t-shirt with your brand name on it. The best brand names will not only communicate something understandable but will allow whoever is wearing the t-shirt *and* whoever is reading it to interpret the exact meaning while still being on-brand. Growing Bolder on a t-shirt passes that test. Growing Bolder in what way? Starting a new business? Training for a triathlon? Recovering from a disease? Going back to college? Writing a book? Starting a new relationship? It fits in all cases and is still on-brand. It's a statement about aspiration, risk taking, adventure and experience. It's a statement about hope and optimism. It's a statement that can be personalized by anyone you wears it or sees it.

### **4: Don't just understand your brand, understand how it differentiates from competitors.**

Branding is as much about differentiating as it is about defining. When we began producing content that targets 50+ consumers, almost everyone jumped to the conclusion that we were producing "senior" public affairs content because that was the only reference that they had. No one was approaching aging the way that we were. We needed to attack the prevailing stereotype. We developed our brand in part by differentiating from competitors. Even today we're always aware of the fact that many, if not most, in our culture still make quick and inaccurate assumptions about older people and therefore about our brand. In our case, who we're not is as almost as powerful a brand statement as who we are.

### **5: Understand that you are a content producer. You are, in fact, a media company and need to think like one.**

The media landscape is now digital and there are multiple platforms that give you direct access to your customers. You don't necessarily need a full-blown in-house media division but you do need, at the bare minimum, someone who can write. Social media platforms are critical to brand building and a small company has to create content on a daily basis with a consistent, creative voice. Every company, no matter how small, needs a go-to person to create social media posts, write articles, news releases, ads, marketing and sales pieces, media kits, etc.

**In your opinion, what is an example of a company that has done a fantastic job building a believable and beloved brand. What specifically impresses you? What can one do to replicate that?**

I admire any brand that spawns a passionate and engaged brand community. There may be no better indicator of that than a desire to have a brand tattoo. I'm not talking about the marketing stunts in which some brands have created a contest with the chance to win a big prize for getting tattooed. There is no end to what someone will do for a trip to Hawaii or a chicken sandwich every week for a year.

I'm talking about Harley Davidson, Nike, Ironman, Disney and Apple. All are prime examples of brands that people want to tattoo on their bodies in an unsolicited show of brand loyalty. We've had more than one follower ask if they needed permission to tattoo the Growing Bolder logo on themselves and I couldn't have been more pleased.

If I have to pick one brand that I admire most, it would have to be Apple because not one is better at creating brand religion and a community of passionate evangelists. Apple is so good at building brand and staying on-brand that the point has been made that it is, in reality, a marketing company. That ignores the fact that it is a visionary, innovative technology company but there is no question that marketing built the brand and maintains the fervid relationship with its customers.

What can we all learn from Apple? Brand has to reflect product, but to be iconic it has to connect through emotion and aspiration. It has to encourage users to believe that more is possible. A computer company does that. So does a motorcycle company, a shoe company and a media company. All are very different but all they all teach us that when it comes to building brand, your product is secondary to your messaging.

**In advertising, one generally measures success by the number of sales. How does one measure the success of a brand building campaign? Is it similar, is it different?**

For Growing Bolder, brand building success is active engagement which is now easily measured. How many viewers, readers, and listeners are liking, sharing, commenting, recommending and purchasing across all of our media channels? If we can continue to create and build engagement, the value of our brand and the opportunity to leverage it in new and profitable ways will increase. We are seeing this now with new partnership opportunities for brand extensions that align with the Growing Bolder ethos, extend our reach and provide great value to our users.

The most desired result from a brand building campaign is the unsolicited, organic creation of authentic brand ambassadors — those who are so passionate about the content and messaging that they self-select as brand evangelists and become unpaid influencers. This is important for all



brands because we now trust the opinions of ordinary people that we admire more than more than celebrities and we trust their recommendations more than we do advertising.

### **What role does social media play in your branding efforts?**

We view social media platforms first and foremost as branding channels and not marketing channels. We strive to provide value first. It's that value that creates relationships and ultimately provides the opportunity to market to our followers.

There are four or five key social media platforms and every small business needs to be on at least two or three of them. We put most of our focus on Facebook because that's where our audience is and once they put their content on the platform and connect with friends they aren't going anywhere — the barrier to exit is too high. Also, Facebook has become very adept at developing and incorporating important platform features from new competitors. Facebook Live was an answer to Periscope. Marketplace was an answer to Craigslist. Facebook has the capital, the desire, and the ability to quickly develop and incorporate any new feature that might threaten its dominance.

We made the decision early on that we would build a presence on Facebook but would steadfastly resist the temptation to buy followers or engagement. We would simply create, aggregate and post compelling content and our growth and reach would be 100% organic and 100% authentic. The result is that we now have more active engagement than most large, national media brands and significantly more than any of our competitors.

A word of caution. Credibility is the only currency that matters when building a brand. It's easy to buy followers and the temptation to do so is strong, especially for a small company. But the big social media platforms now regularly purge brands and "influencers" of fake followers. Once you have a reputation for buying fans or followers, you've lost all credibility.

### **What advice would you give to other marketers or business leaders to thrive and avoid burnout?**

It takes passion to succeed, because passion is what fuels persistence. Without passion for your mission, you are doomed. The reason that Growing Bolder is still here is because we have refused to go away. That doesn't mean that we don't have a unique product, a great business mission, and a sophisticated business model. Even great ideas are met with enormous resistance and face seemingly overwhelming challenges. It takes persistence to survive and ultimately thrive and that's why passion is paramount.

The problem with passion is that it can lead to an unhealthy lifestyle and ultimately, burnout. For me, the answer is regular exercise and I strongly recommend it. The key to success is what I call, “eliminating the option not to.”

I get up and swim 3 days a week. When my alarm sounds at 4:44 a.m., I’m up immediately and out my door. I don’t allow myself to think “it’s too cold,” “it’s raining or “I got to bed too late and the extra sleep is more important.” At that hour, in that half-awake state, our weak selves become great negotiators and want to engage in a debate about the pros and cons of getting out of a warm bed. It can be 34 degrees, raining and thundering but I don’t allow myself to ever think, “They’ll cancel practice.” When my alarm goes off, I get up and I go.

Deciding to do something isn’t enough. We have to eliminate the option to not do it. Ultimately, that’s not only the best path forward, it’s the easiest path forward. Who has the time and energy to argue with themselves about things we should be doing.

**You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)**

Inspiring a movement is exactly our business mission. We’re dedicated to helping people of all ages understand that the number one determinant of how we age is not genetics, it’s lifestyle. And the number one lifestyle determinant of how we age is not diet or exercise, although both are important. It’s our belief system about aging.

Growing Bolder’s mission is nothing short of changing the culture of aging. We’re sharing the encouraging message that if we make the right lifestyle choices and, most importantly, if we change our belief system about what’s possible as we age, we can not only dramatically improve our chances of living active lives into our 90s and 100s, we can reduce future healthcare costs and significantly shorten or eliminate the period of disease and disability at the end of our lives.

Our culture begins devaluing each successive day beyond what it considers to be our prime. This is the most damaging, life-limiting lie inflicted upon us by an ageist society. We’re not meant to live lives of decreasing value or diminishing return. We’re not meant to go quietly into the good night. We’re meant to live with passion, purpose and significance for as long as possible and the boundaries of that possibility are being redrawn every day.

**Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?**

I am a collector of inspiring quotes. The best speak truth to fear and reason to irrationality. My favorite “life lesson quote” changes on an almost daily basis according to what challenges I’m

facing that day. A good overall Growing Bolder message is from Atlas Shrugged by Ayn Rand. It's relevant to my life because our culture wanted me to believe that becoming a first-time entrepreneur in my late 50s was not reasonable. It's relevant to all of us because we all begin to believe that age or circumstance close the window on opportunity and at some point, we must resign ourselves to the flawed belief that it's too late.

Do not let your fire go out, spark by irreplaceable spark in the hopeless swamps of the not-quite, the not-yet, and the not-at-all. Do not let the hero in your soul perish in lonely frustration for the life you deserved and have never been able to reach. Check your road and the nature of your battle. The world you desired can be won, it exists, it is real, it is possible, it's yours. — Ayn Rand

**We are blessed that very prominent leaders in business and entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world with whom you would like to have a lunch or breakfast with? He or she might just see this, especially if we tag them. :-)**

I've been fortunate in that our media platform has provided me the opportunity to work with or interview many of the men and women I've admired but since you asked, let's go with Ariana Huffington, Richard Branson or Oprah. A lunch for four would be wonderful.

**How can our readers follow you on social media?**

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Growingbolder.com

MarcMiddleton.com

**Facebook:** Facebook.com/bolder1

**Twitter:** @MarcMiddleton

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