

## Chapter 6: Identity, Branding, and Type

“The particular human chain we’re part of is central to our individual identity.”

—Elizabeth Stone (author)

“Who am I?” Now there’s an age-old philosophical question.

Well, once upon a time, in an alternate universe, I was the perfect Peter Pan type, a sprightly, high-spirited tomboy who’s both physically agile and able. And, if it wasn’t for a few frighteningly high notes in the “Little Lamb” solo, I was once the ideal Louise in *Gypsy*: a character that does a complete 180, going from a shy, awkward introvert to a sexy, confident sophisticate.

Fast-forward twenty-some odd years later and it would be safe to say that identifying me with either of these two characters is not only a stretch—it’s flat-out comical!

Okay, so what does that tell us? Your type can and *will* change. It’s bound to eventually. Age range alone will see to that.

Certainly there is a germ of that sassy Peter Pan in me still that now plays out as the fun mom, and that awkwardly bashful girl-turned-sexually confident sophisticate that was Louise now reads as the confident authority, sometimes with a noticeable, vulnerable crack in her armor just to raise the stakes. And, ironically, what was once Louise is now Mama Rose.



Generally, I’m best suited as the trusted best friend or neighbor, comic relief or not. (In life as well as on camera.)

All these things ultimately make up who I am and how I’m perceived in an instant as these all deal with *type*.

Type can be elusive in this business for a number of reasons. Reality is often subjective. Additionally, you may discover yourself growing into a type you’ve never played or out of one that once seemed the most comfortable to you.

The bottom line is: How you read as a talent and what you innately bring to the role speaks volumes before you even utter a sound. How you look (your face, your build) already have an entire performance built right into it. Your presence, whether you realize it or not, says a great deal.

Hopefully, it's saying what you intend it to say. Now there's the rub.

In advertising, we identify with a product or service by its brand identity. This identity is carefully sculpted and established through well-planned promotion and product placement. It often takes years just to come up with a name like Häagen-Dazs or Lunchables, and even longer to establish a reputation like McDonald's or Macy's. As a rule every brand is intended to evoke familiar concepts designed to appeal to specific demographic audiences. These things don't come about on their own, although they're certainly expected to appear that way.

The term branding comes from advertising. It allows you to differentiate yourself from the competition and, in the process, to bond with your audience and create loyalty. Branding is the process of making something distinctive in the marketplace. In a mass medium, to communicate effectively you must be able to convey your point quickly and distinctly, otherwise you may confuse, or, just as bad, underwhelm the viewer/listener.



The term identity comes from marketing. The idea here is if you can easily identify with the product, you can readily determine its value. (Sounds more like casting at every turn.) If you find the subject is something you can identify with rather quickly, you are more likely to embrace it. It will appear familiar, even if it may be something new. This is primarily why type is as important as it is.

Okay, so identity and branding deal with making a product recognizable and representative of something specific.

That's what we do when producing your demo at **Sound Advice**. Determining your type as a talent, for both on-camera and as a voice-over, utilizes many of the same features when developing a brand identity.

As Americans we've been raised on a steady diet of commercials. You're probably far more familiar with identity, branding, and type than you even realize. As a captive and consistent TV viewing audience, we've been saturated with branding.

What speaks to us most from a mass medium speaks to us *individually* first. As actors we're no different. When we first start out in the talent business, we take comfort in the knowledge that no one does what we do.

"I'm me. I'm the only one of me. I don't want to be compared with anyone else."

To be honest, that's not the issue, unless you make it so.

While it's true no one does what you do quite the way you do it, you are, certainly at first glance, perceived as a very specific type. This is true whether you embrace this concept or not. You may as well like it at least a little bit, because without type no one will be able to identify with you *or* establish your value to their future production—and that, my friend, is a cold, hard fact.

So, your type is in large part *how you read to others*; how you come across; how you appear as your personae is conveyed to the viewer. In short, it's who you *are* in the most basic, broadest sense. Identity and branding speak to your specific color, nuance, and creation.

## **You and Mass Media**

First of all, to clarify, the term media refers to *multiple* forms of mass communication, such as stage, film, television, commercial work, Internet, cable, print for magazines and billboards, and radio, to name a few. A medium would be a single form of any of these.

That said, today's talent are generally expected to be well versed in all forms of media. This means understanding what is needed and wanted from you should you be cast to perform in any or all of them.

Most talent focus their efforts by specializing in one form over another. However, if we don't venture beyond what we know, we tend to limit our viable options professionally.

All that said, it's unrealistic to expect every talent to be appropriate for every job that comes down the pike. We're all well suited for a variety of work, and yet many of us may specialize in just one or two aspects of this business. And that's fine, if that suits you.

Consider, for example, an established working actor who began his career in radio. Later this talent became a disc jockey, and from there got into improvisation and stand-up. Later this talent expanded his skills into stage, commercials, and sitcoms. This eventually evolved into film, cable, and back into commercials again, and even animation and spokesperson work. Of course, voice-over plays a prominent role in all of these forms of media.

I use this example due to the fact that this is the course many talent have taken, whether well-known or rank and file. This will continue to be the case as long as the industry exists

if you anticipate being a steady working actor. It's simply the nature of the beast. The point is: In today's market, we're expected to master multiple disciplines.

Technology has evolved to the point where a single performance can be transferred to numerous media outlets: your film performance can be played on the Internet, on your smartphone, iPad, on cable, and on network television. Yet the same performance demands were required of you regardless of all these different forms of media.

This is what can be observed as the ongoing *melding of media*; what was once solely on television is now playing at the movie theater and on the Internet and so on. Therefore, what was once considered a great divide from one medium to another is more symbiotic than ever before.

So mastering a variety of media might not be as much of a stretch as you once may have thought. It does require mastering a few technical skills within each art form, but beyond that, the truth is... acting is acting is acting!

We're often told, from some highly professional, well-meaning persons that, "Voice-over is a very different skill set. It's not at all like other forms of acting!"

We hear the same adage applied to the various other media of which we are "expected" to be just as skillful in.

Approaching each new form of media as a dramatic departure from what is familiar is a trap. It's a common misnomer that only serves to throw perfectly capable talent under the bus. So instead of approaching a new medium as if it were alien, do your best to *embrace it*.

## **Versatility**

As stage actors we're taught we're supposed to be *everything*. And certainly that's the general consensus regarding acting as a profession. You're supposed to be as well versed with Shakespeare as you are with Arthur Miller, as comfortable with comedy as you are with pathos, able to tackle *Medea* and turn around and just as easily play in a sitcom. For what it's worth, *none* of these tasks are all that easy. They all demand a tremendously high skill level from you as an actor, yet we're told *that's* being versatile, *that's* the job, and it's simply what's expected of us.

Well, as much as I love him, Shakespeare is not for everyone. I've come to this conclusion after sitting through hours of poorly performed productions of the Bard (hours of my life I will *never* get back) performed by actors who love the text and are quite good in numerous acting styles, just not this one. ("I wish him the very best—*elsewhere*," as my mother used to say.) Of course in some cases there are those who will never master this particular style, it may never have any bearing on whether these talent continue to work with any regularity. The talent in question might be incredibly successful in some other genre of the industry.

Essentially being versatile has to do with three things:

1. Classically, versatility has referred to whether you are as skillful at becoming a persona far different from yourself, or whether each character you play is a dramatic departure from the last.
2. The ability to transfer your skills from one medium to another also denotes versatility. With advancing technology, mass media continues to meld into a single, more versatile source. The more you familiarize yourself with the few technical demands required in each medium, the more confident you'll be to deliver the best possible performance. \*
3. Versatility speaks to making yourself *flexible* enough to be prepared for whatever the production requires of you. For example, in theater, you typically have at least two weeks of rehearsal and then a week of previews before a production opens. Yet it's on the rarest occasion in recorded media you'd be required to deliver only one perfect take. It's certainly preferred you deliver your very best from the first take until the last, but a variety of inflections offered among repeated takes, within the parameters of the production, are most consistently needed and wanted from you.

*\* This could account for the reason so many stage actors have such a tough time making the transition to a new medium such as film or commercial. They often give themselves too long a runway to get off the ground, even though they're perfectly cast for the commercial, type-wise.*

## **Who Are You?**

Acting is a card game: The objective is to lead with *trump*; lead with POWER. In other words, establish yourself with what it is you do best.

Sounds easy. However, you may be too close to it to determine for yourself how you're perceived. This speaks to type. It's not uncommon, even if you've been pursuing a career in this business for a number of years, you may only stumble upon the work you're best suited to land as a type.

If your type changes or falls out of favor with the trends, a complete reevaluation of who you are and how you're perceived needs to be done if you hope to continue in this business.

Nothing stays the same, and type is no exception. If you had been relatively successful at one time and now you're not, something changed. It may be your marketing or the fact that you stopped making yourself available to the work. You may have changed agents. Then again, it may be your type has changed or the market has changed and those who once had a call for your type now require something else. There are a handful of factors that could be at play here, and determining how you're perceived *right now* is a very good place to start. You may find you typically do best with what interests or entertains you most.

We meet talent every day at SOUND ADVICE who we'd consider extremely marketable for commercial work, yet far too often, the talent don't consider themselves commercially viable. This may occur for a variety of reasons. It may be due to the fact that, in the case of many stage actors, we are generally taught to repel ANYTHING commercial, as this would be considered "selling out." Unfortunately this mindset has managed to impede more talent from establishing themselves professionally and making a stable living in this

business. It's quite the stigma to overcome, especially if it's been drilled into you for four years or more in theater school.

Yet, it's a little-known fact that many well-known, respected film directors have managed to keep themselves gainfully employed between film projects for decades now directing commercials. Apparently, this fact has eluded all those "well-meaning" acting coaches who are often responsible for perpetuating this notion of selling out. It's a trap and not designed with your best interest.