

Wal-Mart vs. Mom & Pop Stores: The Power of Branding and How It Can Help Your Church

I'm not ashamed to admit that one of my favorite movies is [You've Got Mail](#) with lead actors Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. Ryan's character runs a small independent bookshop in Manhattan, while Hanks's character is opening a large retail bookstore with low prices (if only he'd known how technology would change the way we read) just down the block.

In the late 1990s, when the movie was made, this was a common story line. *What were small businesses going to do when Borders, Walmart, Kmart and Target moved into town? How could they compete with rock-bottom prices and one-stop shopping?*

To be honest, I thought the movie would end with Ryan's Shop Around the Corner somehow spared by Hanks's Fox Books store because of their anonymous online romance, which (spoiler alert!) materializes at the end of the movie. It doesn't. Her shop still goes out of business. Even in the movies, the big-box store wins.

It seemed as though the growth of these massive retailers would only continue, leaving in its wake a trail of broken entrepreneurial dreams and century-old businesses too small to compete. In an economy like ours, in which the dollar is still weak and many are unemployed, such an outcome was almost a sure bet.

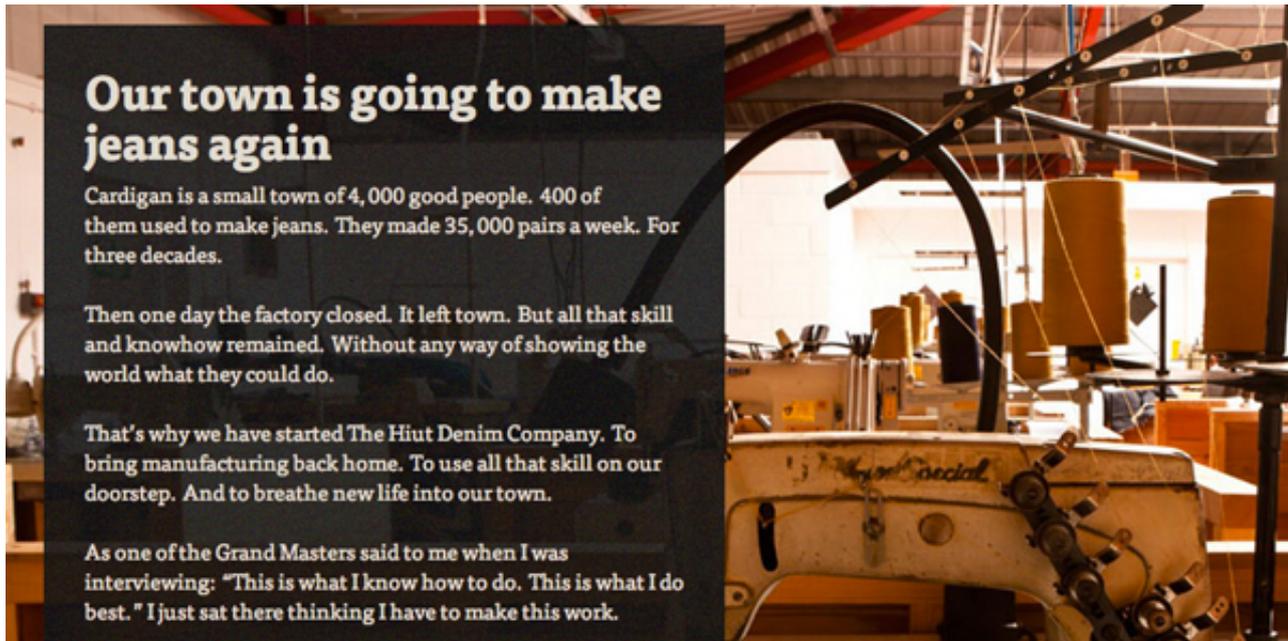
In 2014, that's hardly the case.

The growth of digital (namely social) media—its early forms chronicled in *You've Got Mail*—has provided a marketing weapon for small brands. The antithesis of big-box stores, **artisanal brands are sprouting and flourishing in the post-advertising age.**

These small brands are built with a focus on craftsmanship, hometown pride, [storytelling](#), a clear purpose and spot-on branding. They've made their businesses unique and provide consumers much of what big-box stores can never offer.

Artisanal brands can teach the church a lot about effective content marketing. Here are 10 lessons:

1. ENDEAR AUDIENCES TO THE BRAND THROUGH A WORTHWHILE MISSION



Our town is going to make jeans again

Cardigan is a small town of 4,000 good people. 400 of them used to make jeans. They made 35,000 pairs a week. For three decades.

Then one day the factory closed. It left town. But all that skill and knowhow remained. Without any way of showing the world what they could do.

That's why we have started The Hiut Denim Company. To bring manufacturing back home. To use all that skill on our doorstep. And to breathe new life into our town.

As one of the Grand Masters said to me when I was interviewing: "This is what I know how to do. This is what I do best." I just sat there thinking I have to make this work.

You can buy a pair of jeans 80 percent cheaper at Target, but [Hiut Denim's](#) commitment to its mission, [to go back to making jeans in Cardigan in the UK](#)—where for three decades a factory, now closed, made 35,000 pairs a week—helps keep the Welsh town afloat. Knowing that your purchase is keeping craftsmen employed in a town that depends on manufacturing may very well make it worth it. We mentioned Hiut Denim in a recent post about [brands doing post-advertising right](#). When they heard they made our list, they sent a direct message via Twitter that said, "Thanks for help. The town is grateful." How cool is that?

What's your mission and how are you furthering it?

2. GET YOUR AUDIENCE INVOLVED IN THE CONVERSATION, EVEN IF THEY'RE JUST LISTENING



One of the keys to building a brand from the ground up is to ensure that the talkable products and content you're creating have an audience that can share them. A number of brands, including [Best Made Company](#) and [Herschel Supply Co.](#), have well-designed pop-ups on their websites that greet you with the option of opting into their mailing lists. Even their pop-ups, like their products, are custom made.

Are you giving your audience ways to opt-in to receive your content?

3. PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH



With artisanal brand's higher price point and lower consumer penetration (compared with nationwide brands), it's imperative that staff members showcase themselves using the same

products that they champion. The staff of [Huckberry](#) recently posted on the active-lifestyle company's blog [an article chronicling a recent camping trip they took](#), a trip on which they used and reviewed a number of products Huckberry sells.

Does your audience know you believe in your product or service?

4. TURN THE PURCHASE INTO A STORY ABOUT A LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP



A focus on craftsmanship often means that the product will last a long time. While your run-of-the-mill CPG brand will try to sell you a cheap product that rarely makes it past one use, an artisanal brand helps customers understand why its price points are appropriate. Whether it's a [made-to-order ax from Best Made Company](#) or a [backpack from Herschel Supply Co.](#), its higher price point makes sense because the brand has conveyed a transparent story that helps customers see the value, literally.

What story is the craftsmanship of your product or execution of your service telling?

5. USE A CONSISTENT AND RELATABLE TONE OF VOICE

Why did we name our company Warby Parker?

We've always been inspired by the master wordsmith and pop culture icon, Mr. Jack Kerouac. Two of his earliest characters, recently uncovered in his personal journals, bore the names Zagg Parker and Warby Pepper. We took the best from each and made it our name.

We hope your new glasses will provide all the style you need to travel your road with class, and their price will leave you with some extra cash to use on your journey.

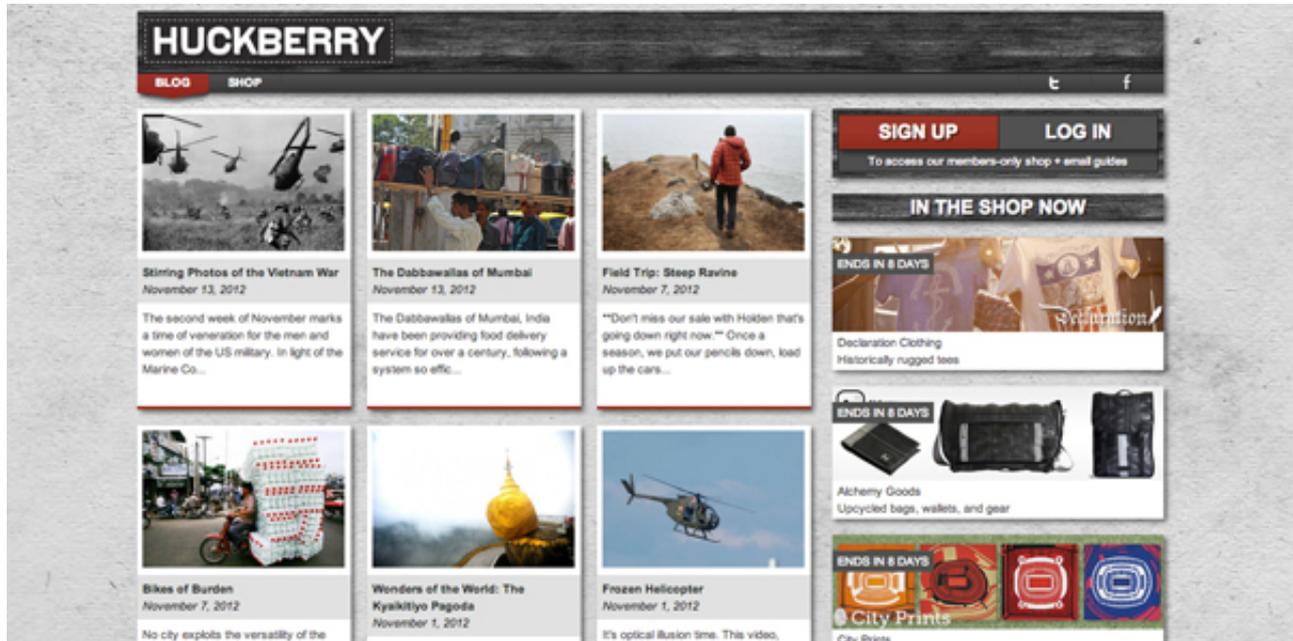
**KEROUAC INSPIRED A
GENERATION TO TAKE A ROAD
LESS TRAVELED AND TO SEE
THE WORLD THROUGH A
DIFFERENT LENS.**

One of the best aspects of artisanal brands I've found while researching is that they convey a consistent tone of voice across all channels. Rarely do you find typical corporate brand jargon.

You won't hear that their products are industry leading, on demand or turnkey. Instead, the voice is friendly and down-to-earth and offers glimpses behind the scenes that help humanize the brand.

Are you speaking the same language as your audience?

6. OFFER A STEADY DIET OF CONTENT



Particularly because these brands are so small, and you won't find [Warby Parker](#) frames at Sunglass Hut or Hiut Denim jeans at Macy's, it's imperative that artisanal brands constantly create content for their audiences to keep the brands top of mind. Many brands create extensive Pinterest and Tumblr pages, blogs, films, social content and more to keep a constant connection with their audience.

Are you creating enough content to remain on your customer's mind?

7. DESIGN MATTERS



Artisanal brands take pride in the way everything about their brands looks, not just the products themselves. If you want your audience to believe that your product is good, your branding had better reflect it.

Have you paid enough attention to design, particularly on your digital channels?

8. EMBRACE LOCAL



Now that big-box stores are in nearly every town in the United States, it's difficult for them to "represent" their "homes." But an artisanal brand often depends on its hometown—the place that defines the brand and its employees. Warby Parker's site proudly links to the [Made in NYC site](#) which lists the "internet companies made with ?" in New York City. The staff of Huckberry often writes about San Francisco–related topics, [such as the city's being a "bastion of the](#)

[bean.](#)

What's unique about your brand's home? Does your audience know?

9. ENCOURAGE USER-GENERATED CONTENT



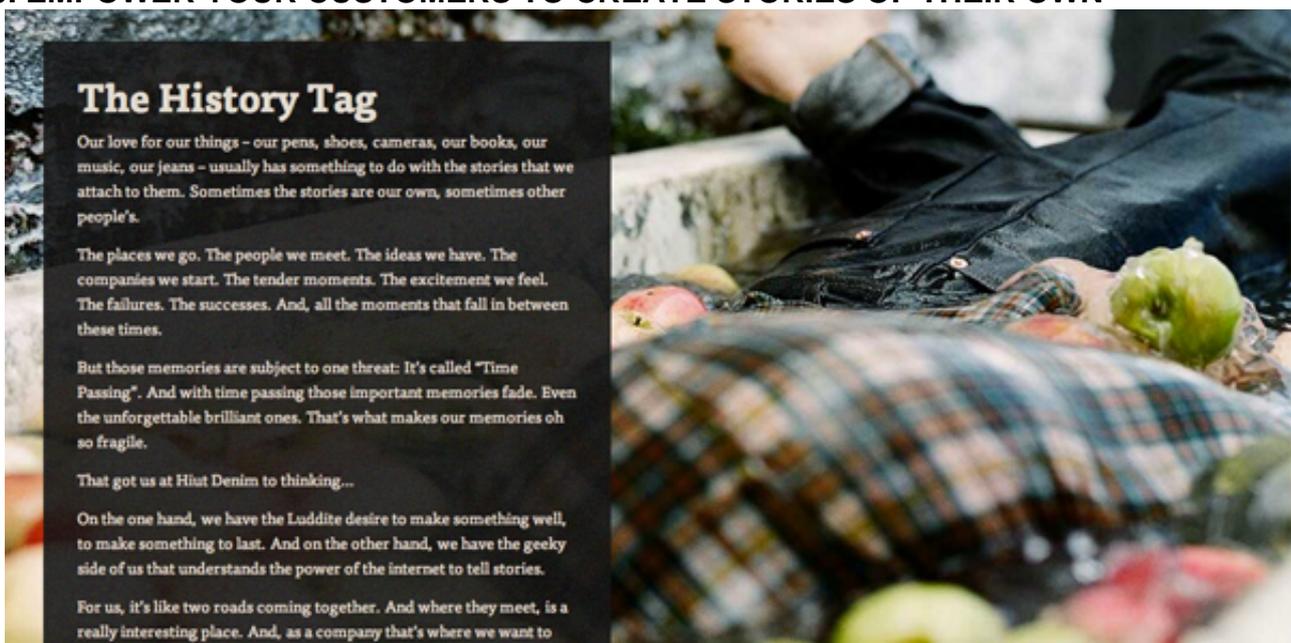
HOME | WEBSITE | SUBMIT



Warby Parker and Herschel Supply urge customers to submit photos of themselves with the product. [Warby Parker puts the pictures on its Facebook Wall](#) and encourages users to vote for their favorite pair, while Herschel Supply includes the photos on [its Tumblr page](#).

Are you tapping your audience for content?

10. EMPOWER YOUR CUSTOMERS TO CREATE STORIES OF THEIR OWN



The History Tag

Our love for our things – our pens, shoes, cameras, our books, our music, our jeans – usually has something to do with the stories that we attach to them. Sometimes the stories are our own, sometimes other people's.

The places we go. The people we meet. The ideas we have. The companies we start. The tender moments. The excitement we feel. The failures. The successes. And, all the moments that fall in between these times.

But those memories are subject to one threat: It's called "Time Passing". And with time passing those important memories fade. Even the unforgettable brilliant ones. That's what makes our memories oh so fragile.

That got us at Hiut Denim to thinking...

On the one hand, we have the Luddite desire to make something well, to make something to last. And on the other hand, we have the geeky side of us that understands the power of the internet to tell stories.

For us, it's like two roads coming together. And where they meet, is a really interesting place. And, as a company that's where we want to

I bought a pre-owned Ford Escape (which I love) from a dealership back in January. In a fairly hidden compartment, I found a CD of hymns and some other items that led me to believe the car might previously have been owned by a member of the clergy. Hopefully that means he didn't speed much. But in reality, I'll never know. Hiut Denim puts a [unique history tag on all its jeans](#) that when entered on the brand's [HistoryTag website](#) allows a customer to craft a story about the purchased product by uploading pictures of where he went in the jeans, what he did and whom he did it with. If ever someone else were to receive the jeans as a hand-me-down or buy them secondhand at a consignment shop, that person would know where they'd been (for better or for worse, I suppose).

How is your audience telling stories about your product/service?

These small, passionate brands are carving out niches and taking risks in the content-marketing space that many larger, inflexible brands only wish they could take. Even if you're not in the market for an ax, an outdoor frying pan or a wallet, make sure you follow them. There's a lot to learn.

Read more from Jon [here](#).