INSIGHTS · BLACKREFER

Your Brand Is What People Say When They Refer You

By Askia Jones · November 10, 2026 · About a 9-minute read

A practical definition of a brand for small-business owners: the sentence a satisfied customer uses to recommend you. How to find that sentence, shape it on purpose, make it easy to repeat and track the referrals it brings, within the rules on reviews and endorsements.

Ask a small-business owner about their brand and you'll usually hear about the logo, the colors or the tagline. Those matter. But they aren't what a customer says when a friend asks, "Do you know anybody who does this?"

That answer is the brand. Something like: "Call Ms. Renee. She does braids for little kids who can't sit still, and she's never late." In one breath, it says who the business serves, what it's known for and why it's the one to call.

Below: why referrals are the truest test of a brand, how to build your "referral sentence," how to hear what customers already say, how to make it easy to repeat, how to encourage referrals within federal rules, how to measure them, and a worksheet you can fill in this week.

What is a brand, really?

In small business branding, the most useful answer is simple: your brand is what people say about you when you're not in the room. The name, logo and website are tools for shaping that. Your brand reputation is the running total of those conversations.

The clearest place to hear it is in a referral, because a referral forces a customer to boil your business down to a sentence someone else can act on. If they can't, the referral doesn't happen, no matter how good your work is.

Why referrals are the truest test of a brand

Advertising is what you say about yourself. A referral is what someone else says about you, with their own reputation on the line.

That's why recommendations carry so much weight. In Nielsen's 2021 Trust in Advertising study, a global online survey of more than 40,000 consumers, 88% of respondents said they trust recommendations from people they know, the most trusted channel in the study. 1 Nielsen's advice to brands: put the consumer

first in every plan, so word of mouth leans in your favor. 1

A good ad can bring in a stranger once. A referral only happens if the experience was good enough, and clear enough, for a customer to explain it to someone else. That makes word-of-mouth marketing for a small business less about clever messaging and more about being easy to recommend.

The referral sentence

Most strong referrals carry three pieces of information:

1. Who you serve. “If you’ve got an older house…” “If you run a small restaurant…”

2. What you’re known for. The specific thing people associate with you: fixing what others couldn’t, the best oxtails on the east side, books closed on time every month.

3. Why you’re the one to call. The reason to choose you: you show up when you say you will, you explain things plainly, you answer the phone.

Together: “If you’ve got an older house, call Darnell. He finds the problem the first time, and he cleans up after himself.”

Write yours as a fill-in-the-blank: “If you’re [who you serve], call [your name]. They’re known for [what], and [why you’re the one to call].”

Find out what customers already say

Your brand already exists in customers’ words. Here are three ways to hear it.

Read your reviews like research. Pull reviews from Google, Yelp, Facebook, your directory listings and thank-you messages into one document. Look for repeated words. If 10 reviews mention “on time” and two mention “affordable,” customers are telling you what you’re known for.

Ask customers directly. After a good experience, ask: “If a friend asked you about us, what would you tell them?” Write the answer down word for word. Don’t suggest words. You’re collecting evidence, not a testimonial.

Listen to how referrals arrive. New customers often repeat the referral unprompted: “My cousin said you’re the one who actually calls back.” Have staff write those lines down. They’re the closest thing to a recording of your brand in action.

Close the gap between what you want and what people say

Write the sentence you want customers to say next to the one they actually say. Most owners find one of three gaps.

They say something narrower. You want to be known as a full-service salon; customers rave about your silk presses. That's a strong position. Lead with it, then introduce other services to people who already trust you.

They say something different. You think you're known for low prices; customers keep mentioning how well you explain things. Believe the customers.

They say something negative, or nothing. If reviews mention slow replies or missed appointments, no new logo will change that. Fix the operation first. Our Insight When to Rebrand, and When You Just Need to Clean Up explains why a new name on the same service usually brings the same reviews.

Closing the gap usually means changing behavior, not marketing. If you want to be known for speed, publish your turnaround time and hit it. If you want a specialty, turn down some work outside it. As our Insight on culture as a competitive advantage argues, specifics are believable; vague claims aren't.

Make the referral easy to repeat

Happy customers still lose referrals in the handoff: the friend forgets your name, can't find you or finds three different phone numbers.

A clear name. Easy to say, spell and search. If you're choosing or changing one, run a trademark search first; Own Your Name Before Someone Else Does shows how.

A one-line description. One plain sentence: "Mobile notary for real estate closings in Prince George's County." Use it in your bio, email signature and listings, so the person who hears the referral sees the same words when they look you up.

Consistent listings. The friend will almost always search for you. Your name, phone, address or service area, hours and website should match everywhere. Google asks businesses to represent themselves "as it's consistently represented and recognized in the real world across signage, stationery, and other branding," and says adding unnecessary information, such as marketing taglines, to a business name isn't permitted and could get a profile suspended. 2 Check Google, Apple Maps, Yelp, social profiles and directories, including BlackRefer.

A memorable detail. Referrals travel on small specifics: the barber who texts when the chair opens, the caterer whose banana pudding shows up at every family event. Pick one that's true and yours.

The experience moments that create the sentence

Customers build the referral sentence from a few moments, not your marketing:

- First contact. “They got back to me the same day” is a referral line.
- The wait. Silence creates doubt; a short update creates trust.
- When something goes wrong. A fast, honest fix can turn a complaint into a recommendation.
- The finish. The result, the cleanup and the handoff are what people describe first.
- The follow-up. A check-in a week later shows you care about the outcome, not just the payment.

Pick the weakest moment and fix it this month.

Equip referrers, and stay within the rules

Make recommending you easy: a card, a link to your listing, a simple “we welcome referrals.” Ask every customer, not just the happiest, for an honest review. But federal rules draw clear lines, and they apply to small businesses too.

Endorsements must be honest. The FTC’s Endorsement Guides say endorsements “must reflect the honest opinions, findings, beliefs, or experience of the endorser.” 3 Don’t write reviews for customers or tell them what to say.

Fake reviews are banned. The FTC’s rule on consumer reviews and testimonials, effective October 21, 2024, prohibits buying or selling fake reviews or testimonials, buying positive or negative reviews, certain undisclosed insider reviews, company-controlled review sites posing as independent, certain review suppression and buying fake followers or engagement. 4

Don’t pay for a sentiment. A business may not offer incentives “in exchange for, or conditioned expressly or by implication on,” reviews expressing a particular sentiment, positive or negative. 5 “10% off for a five-star review” is out.

Disclose rewards. A discount, free service or referral bonus is a “material connection.” The Guides say an unexpected material connection must be disclosed clearly and conspicuously, and that free or discounted products count “regardless of whether the advertiser requires an endorsement in return.” One example, a program awarding points for social media posts about a brand, calls for disclosure. 3 If you reward referrals, ask participants to mention the reward when they recommend you, especially in public posts.

Family and staff must disclose. Owners and managers may not post reviews of their own business without clearly disclosing the relationship, and asking employees or relatives for reviews is restricted when those reviews appear without disclosure and the manager didn’t tell them to disclose, or encouraged them not to. 5

Don't bury bad reviews. Groundless legal threats or intimidation to remove a review are prohibited, as is implying your site shows all reviews while suppressing negative ones. 5

Know platform rules. Google goes further: merchants may not offer payment, discounts or free goods or services for posting any review, discourage negative reviews, selectively ask only happy customers or request specific content. 6 Keep referral rewards and review requests separate, and never reward Google reviews.

The FTC also says advertisers should guide endorsers, monitor compliance and fix problems. 3 For a small business, a short note works: tell the truth, mention the reward, don't make claims you can't back up.

Measure referrals

Learning how to get customer referrals starts with knowing where customers come from.

Ask every new customer, "How did you hear about us?" Put it on your booking form, intake sheet or checkout page, with simple choices (friend or family, Google, social media, a directory, an event, other) and a blank for a name.

Record the referrer and the words. Who sent them, and what that person said. It feeds your next round of research.

Track by source. A spreadsheet works: date, customer, source, referrer, what they said, whether they bought. Give regular referral partners, such as a realtor who sends clients, their own code or link.

Review monthly, and say thanks. Who refers repeatedly? Which phrases keep showing up? A handwritten note costs little. If you give anything of value, follow the disclosure guidance above.

Why this matters even more for Black-owned businesses

Many Black-owned businesses run without staff, let alone a marketing department. The U.S. Census Bureau counted about 4.4 million Black-owned businesses without employees, 14.4% of all nonemployer businesses, compared with about 201,000 Black-owned employer businesses. 7 When the owner is the whole team, the referral sentence is often the marketing plan.

Networks matter, and not every owner has enough of them. In a Chicago Fed survey of Detroit-area businesses, fielded from December 2021 to February 2022, Black business owners scored high on needs including minority supplier and procurement contracts, lending relationships and funding support networks; women-owned businesses scored high on the need for support networks. 8 Black-owned firms make up 19% of all firms in the Detroit metro area, compared with 11% nationally, the researchers note. 8 The findings are regional, come from a convenience sample of 85 operating businesses (59 Black-owned) that the authors say isn't necessarily representative, and concern funding and support networks rather than customer referrals. 8 But they point the same way: connections are a real business resource.

That's the case for treating referrals as a system, not luck. A clear sentence travels further through church groups, family chats, alumni networks and neighborhood pages. Consistent listings make sure the person who hears it can find you. A verified directory gives your best customers somewhere to send people.

The referral sentence worksheet

Fill this in with real evidence, not wishes. Revisit it every quarter.

Part	Question to answer	Where to find the evidence	Your answer
Who you serve	Who are your best customers, in a phrase a customer would use?	Your best 10 customers; review language	
What you're known for	What do customers praise most often, in their words?	Reviews; "What would you tell a friend?" answers	
Why you're the one to call	Why do they pick you over other options?	Referral comments; repeat customers	
Current referral sentence	What do people actually say now?	Notes on how referrals arrive	
Target referral sentence	What do you want them to say, that you can deliver every time?	Your strategy, checked against your operations	
The gap	What has to change in the experience to close it?	Complaints; slow or missed moments	
Memorable detail	What true, specific detail could people repeat?	Things customers mention unprompted	
Name and one-liner	Is your name easy to say and search? What's your one-line description?	Ask three people to spell and describe you	
Listings	Do name, phone, hours and links match everywhere?	Google, Apple Maps, Yelp, social, BlackRefer	
Ethics check	Are rewards disclosed, reviews unpaid and requests sent to everyone?	FTC rules and platform policies above	

Part	Question to answer	Where to find the evidence	Your answer
Tracking	Do you ask “How did you hear about us?” and record the answer?	Booking form, intake, checkout	

An illustrative example

> Illustrative example. The business, owner and details below are fictional, created for this article. Any resemblance to a real business is unintended.

Terrence runs a one-person mobile auto detailing business outside Charlotte. He wanted to be known for ceramic coatings, his highest-priced service. But when he pulled his reviews into a document, “ceramic” barely appeared. What kept showing up was “came to my job” and “done before my lunch break ended.”

He asked a dozen customers what they’d tell a friend. Most said some version of: “He comes to your office parking lot, and your car’s spotless before you’re back at your desk.”

So he leaned in. His one-line description became “Workplace car detailing in Charlotte, finished while you work.” He matched his name, phone and service area across Google, Instagram and his directory listings, and started texting a photo when each job was done, a detail customers began mentioning in reviews. He added “How did you hear about us?” to his booking form and offered a discount on the next detail to anyone who sends a new customer, asked them to mention it if they post about him and never offered anything for reviews.

His tracking sheet soon showed most new customers coming from a few office buildings. He now offers ceramic coatings to customers who already trust him, instead of leading with them.

Shape the sentence on purpose

Your brand is already being spoken out loud, in group chats, at barbershops and after church. You can’t script it, but you can shape it. Learn what people say now, decide what you want them to say and make your service back it up. Make your name, description and listings easy to repeat and find. Encourage referrals honestly, never pay for reviews and track where customers come from.

This article is general information, not legal advice. FTC rules and platform policies change; check the current text or a qualified attorney before you launch a review or referral reward program.

Follow BlackRefer Insights for more practical, sourced guides for Black business owners. And if a Black-owned business has earned your recommendation, put it in writing: refer it to BlackRefer. It takes about a minute, and no account is needed.

About the author: Askia Jones is the founder of BlackRefer and the Black Ecosystem, a network of platforms covering Black business, health, scholarship, culture and innovation, including Melanated.ai. He builds and runs these properties with the help of AI tools for research, editing and planning, and he writes Insights to give Black-owned businesses practical guidance they can use right away.

Data, regulations and platform policies in this article were current as of November 10, 2026. Check each source for the latest.

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