



What Bren Can Teach You About Publicity, Kickstarter and Smiles

This June I met cheerful **Bren Bataclan, creator of smileyb™**, at the International Licensing Expo. At the time, I really had no idea about the mission he was on. I hope you enjoy his story as much as I did.

J'net Question: What's your background and how long have you been an artist?

Bren Answer: This year is the 10th anniversary of my being a full time artist. I did my undergraduate studies at UCLA in Graphic Design. Then an internship at a Hollywood Studio put me on a path of attending Ohio State for grad school in computer animation. I went on to teach computer animation and graphic design at University of Massachusetts Amherst.

In the late 90s, I left teaching and joined the .com world for three years. But after the big crash in 2000, I found myself without a job and plenty of time for getting creative.

This is really the first time I started to create and paint and my childhood experiences really just popped up and came through at this time. I grew up watching a lot of Animae as a kid. And I painted these little characters, which I grew up drawing in the Philippines. Their colors are these vibrant tropical colors, really the types of bright hues I remember from my neighborhood. Strangely enough I premiered my artwork exactly 10 years ago, in October of 2003. And at my first open studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I sold 49 out of the 56 paintings I had up for sale.



J'net: Wow, that's amazing! I bet you were thrilled.

Bren: I couldn't believe it. I was so psyched. And I wanted to thank Boston for supporting me. So instead of looking for a job, I used the money to create 30 more paintings. I created kind of a 'street project' where I would give away paintings to 'pay it forward.'

J'net: What was the specific idea and goal?

Bren: The goal for my street art, “The Smile Boston Project,” was to thank Boston for buying almost all of my paintings and to spread smiles. I really love graffiti and would like to get my paintings in front of lots of people like that, and to bring art to people who don’t usually visit art galleries. So giving away “free” paintings in public places is really kind of a temporary—or more like it, wimpy—version of graffiti. I figured that in a couple of weeks, I would just place the paintings in random places around the city for people to find...senior centers, park benches, train stations, hospitals, schools, etc. To each painting I attached a note that said: “This painting is yours, if you promise to smile at random people more often.” Someone from *Boston Magazine* found one of the paintings and wrote about it.



J'net: Were you trying to get publicity? How did you get exposure on the *CBS News* and in the *Washington Post*, *The Smithsonian Magazine*, *Readers Digest*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The Detroit Free Press*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Boston Globe* and more?

Bren: I wasn’t trying to get publicity, at first. I was just trying to spread smiles. *Reader’s Digest* was looking to do a story about someone who was making a difference in their community, when someone sent them my story. Then a *CBS Evening News* producer’s husband read the story about my project in the *Reader’s Digest*. He then suggested the story to his wife. And his wife, the producer shared my *Reader’s Digest* article to Katie Couric. It was a mom from one of the schools that hired me to present earlier this year that suggested my project for a story to her sister, a *Washington Post* travel reporter.

J'net: How do you think this all happened?

Bren: I think synchronicity continues to play a big role in all of this. It was a rather organic idea, just a small but honest thought that rolled and grew. And the time was right. Folks are really hungering for wholesome art. And in terms of the style, cartoon art is really huge right now.

J'net: I know you can create a publicity campaign like this, but it has to be genuine and sincere to work. How has that exposure made a difference in your business?

Bren: Katie Couric's coverage changed my business. Immediately after the airing of my CBS Evening News story, within an hour, I had three months' worth of painting orders.

And then schools outside of Massachusetts started hiring me to paint murals. There is a 'pay it forward' kindness message to this campaign, which schools really like...it fits in with the current emphasis on anti-bullying. You know, I had never done a mural before, and now over the last ten years, I've done 70 of them.

I now start each one of my presentations with the CBS Evening news clip. I can't even begin to tell you how that piece helps. Being featured in the *Smithsonian Magazine*, *The Washington Post* and other publications has also helped my art career a lot. It gave my work credibility.

J'net: It's been self-funded for 10 years, until last spring when you asked for funds on Kickstarter.



Bren: Yes, have supported myself for 10 years through my art and given away more than 1500 paintings and a couple of murals.

J'net: I get asked a lot about Kickstarter and I think our readers would be really interested in how you created a campaign that received 300% of its goal!

Bren: Well over the last 10 years I have given away paintings in 30 states. So the campaign started when I decided that, for this 10th anniversary year, I'd create enough paintings to give them away in 20 states, plus Washington D.C., by the end of the year. I wanted to celebrate and finish giving paintings across the entire country—all 50 states.

I decided this meant that by the end of 2013, I needed to paint about 400+ paintings.

My formula: 15 (paintings per state) x 21 (20 states + DC) = 315

Plus 100 paintings for Kickstarter rewards, to be given away as gifts to the high-end campaign donors. (Donations of \$95+ receive an 11"x14"; \$195+ receive an 18"x24"; and \$495+ receive 24"x36")

(I had to ask, “Why 15 per state?”... and I learned it’s his favorite number.)

J’net: Did you consider other crowd-sourcing companies, or just Kickstarter?

Bren: I like Kickstarter because it supports mostly artists. If you don’t get sponsored for the full amount within your campaign time frame, you don’t get to keep anything. With this in mind, I decided to ask for the minimum amount that I would need to purchase my painting supplies, like the canvases and paints.

I was so excited to get funded for more than \$9000. And when you receive more than your requested amount you get to keep it all. This worked out so well because the \$9000 just about covered all of the art supplies, as well as the travel expenses which included hotels, gas, airfare, food and lodging. I put more than 9000 miles on my car this summer.

J’net: How exactly did you create the campaign and execute it?

Bren: Well first you fill out all of their forms. Then I started by writing a script and doing a video to explain my campaign idea. You can do it by showing examples, but the say the videos do much better. I did about 20 takes and picked the best one to use. I didn’t edit it at all.

After the campaign is launched I posted it on my social media outlets. I also did a one-time email blast to my client list.

J’net: So it’s up to you to actually market the campaign and help it get exposure?

Bren: Oh, yes. I am very careful about mass emailing and rarely, if ever, have I used my client list. But I wanted them to know about the project. About a week to a week-and-a-half after I sent the email, which included a link to the Kickstarter campaign, I started calling people who didn’t respond electronically. What I learned, is that a lot of the emails got caught in spam filters, and of course, folks just get busy and inundated with stuff.

It’s really hard to be nice and also ask for money, too. I called some of the potential backers, but I never pushed them. I am sure that my calls made all the difference in the world. Of the people who donated to my campaign, 90% were clients, family, friends, social media friends (Facebook and Twitter), plus the Filipino-American community was really supportive. Only 10% of the total money came from random finders of the Kickstarter campaign.

I also learned that shorter campaigns work better. I got most of the money in at the beginning of the event, then it really died down. I believe that my campaign was a

success because folks were actually eager to contribute. Most of them knew that I have been funding my project for a decade on my own.

J'net: Do you have advice for other artists who want to build funding through crowd-sourcing?

Bren: As I explained, an effective campaign really has to reach beyond the Kickstarter website. You have to do a lot of emails, Facebooking, Twittering and phone calling, as well. People often don't realize this. Most importantly, you have to be really optimistic and have lots of fun with it! Doing Kickstarter was really exciting!

J'net: What are your plans now?



Bren: I am preparing to have a booth at the International Licensing Expo in Las Vegas. I will also be painting a lot of work for the NYC Art Expo, where I will introduce my new painting series. I am also planning to increase my prices for the first time in 10 years. I will give more school presentations, as well as paint murals at schools and businesses.

[Bren's Website](#)

[Kickstarter Project Link](#)

Interviewer note: *I think Bren's story is very inspiring. While very serendipitous, or whatever you call that 'Hand' which plays a role in our lives and connects the dots, I do also know that he had an idea, made a plan and executed the details. Create, think, and act. Bren told me that even if Kickstarter didn't work out, he*

would have found a way to give away paintings in those last 20 states + D.C. That's how much he believed in what he was doing.

I am teaching a class later this month on 'PR and Promotions for Art Licensors', and I can't think of a better example than this. He didn't set out to get publicity, but because his idea was from the heart and genuine, it 'naturally' created the excitement energy (and that becomes a P.R. buzz!). You can learn how to create publicity, and I can teach you how, but there is nothing like a really good story to catch people's interest, which always boosts exposure and sales. Creating a mundane press release, or even worse, a fake story, one that is not true to who you are and your real purpose and intention, is unlikely to get this kind of positive attention. Then when you do have a great story with exposure, you want to leverage it to move yourself to new levels in your life or business.

Lastly, I appreciate Bren's honesty and details about what it takes to create a Kickstarter campaign. I am sure many of you will and should think about this, but to be realistic about what it will take to get this type of phenomenal results.