

Building the 'you' brand

- Find your authentic self.
- Get feedback from your peers on the impression you give to others.
- Seize every opportunity to present your brand to shareholders, employees and the media.
- Don't forget to look in the mirror before you go out!

The people factor is now becoming the strongest element of a brand, and the branding of service is the next big challenge for business. As business leaders, you can no longer rely on a traditional name or established brand alone to stand out from the crowd consistently. It is becoming increasingly important for the business itself to have a strong personality, and that has to start with the CEO.

In order to be an effective leader, a strong personal brand has to be built on authentic values. This is the basic ingredient of the cocktail for the 'you' brand. These values must then be consistently projected in all communication with all stakeholders, all the time.

Your responsibility to the brand

Because as a CEO your personal brand

reputation should reinforce and enhance the corporate brand values, a good place to start is the corporate brand messages and the vision you have for the company. What do the brand words actually mean when it comes to the people element of the business? For example, if your corporate values are 'progressive', 'responsive' and 'efficient', what are you doing personally to reinforce these values?

What are the rest of the executive team and their management teams doing in this respect? What about the receptionists? They are usually the first point of contact and the first impression people get of the organisation. Are you encouraging brilliant, customer-facing interaction with an 'on-brand message' or are you leaving it to chance? When you're not responsive, is it just a blip, or part of your brand? You must first analyse how you're going to achieve these corporate values with the most powerful and impactful element of your brand – your people, and that includes you.



What image are you projecting to colleagues, the public and your customers? By being yourself, being consistent and looking the part, you can build that all-important 'you' brand... with a little help from Lesley Everett.

‘THE
you’
BRAND

It's important to remember that you already have a personal brand image, whether you've consciously cultivated it or not. Your personal brand is a collection of the clear ideas that others have of you when they think of you and your company. You can influence it – positively or negatively. Is the perception that others have about you really what you think it is, what you want it to be – or is it miles off message?

Find who you really are

We know that to be sincere and taken seriously in business, our brand must be based on our authentic self. All too often we see people trying to be someone they're not, and the result is that we don't trust them and their image appears superficial. As a leader, it's important that others know who you really are and what you stand for. For others to buy into you, they need to understand something about you as a person, not just your business style.

Through my coaching with many CEOs and senior executives (male and female) in the UK and internationally, I consistently find that they feel it's appropriate and right to keep their true personal values hidden from stakeholders, that it's not necessary for them to reveal too much. The perceptions of your brand from the outside, however, may be different from how you think they are. It is worth asking the question: is your brand influenced by what you believe are the expectations of the people around you rather than being completely authentic? Be aware of the power and impact of being more transparent with your values.

So how do you as a CEO build that all-important 'you brand'? As a very first step, you must decide what your authentic personal brand actually is. Sounds simple enough, yet I find that with senior executives in particular, the brand has become moulded and confused by external influences and forces and many people lack clarity in what their fundamental motivators, drivers and values are. Perhaps people high up the career ladder

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become a little too corporate-modelled? Consider your fundamental strengths, your individuality and your personality. Uncover from within what you're outstandingly good at. How would you describe your personality, your style, your principles/values and your talents? What would you include in a commercial about yourself? How good is your personal elevator pitch?

Peer review

When you have gained some clarity on this, it's then essential that you get some feedback from your management and executive teams. Encourage this as a team-building/motivational exercise to get the best results – you don't want people to feel singled out or to hold back. Ask them how they view you and how you come across in different situations and environments – for example, in presentations, board meetings, social events, after-dinner speeches, media interviews, etc. You need candid views. There is not a great deal of point otherwise. And you should give honest, candid feedback too – with tact, sincerity and diplomacy of course!

You need to then check out the perception gaps – the differences in how you see yourself as opposed to how you come across to others. This will give you valuable feedback in order to focus on the right areas and manage your brand image more consistently and authentically.

Managing your visibility in the office and outside should be a high priority for you if you're serious about building a strong personal brand. It is no longer good enough to leave all the public speaking, media interviews and management meetings to others in the team if you're going to add serious strength to your brand, and personality to your organisation. Being clear about your values and those of your company, and presenting those with charisma and impact at every opportunity to the outside world is something you should become great at. I find that bringing in analogies and experiences that say something about you personally are a

fantastic way for your audiences to buy into you and your message.

Look the part

'Clothing is the furniture of the mind made visible,' said James Laver. Whether you like it or not people will judge you on your appearance, so it needs to be right for you and the organisation. And appropriate! This is an important area on which to get honest feedback and advice. Do you always wear a formal business suit, whatever the occasion, for fear of getting it wrong? Does your business casual wardrobe resemble your weekend wardrobe? These are important areas to work on so that your non-verbal image projects and reinforces strong brand values. How good is your 'personal packaging' at marketing you? What does it say behind your back?

Whether you are CEO of a large global organisation or are a small business entrepreneur, you need to focus on your unique differentiator to compete and succeed consistently. With so many similar products and services being offered, your only real – but most powerful – differentiators are your people; therefore it makes sense to start with your own personal brand. Remember that world-class means a strong and powerful personality, which is known beyond your actual products and services – make sure you are that personality. ■



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