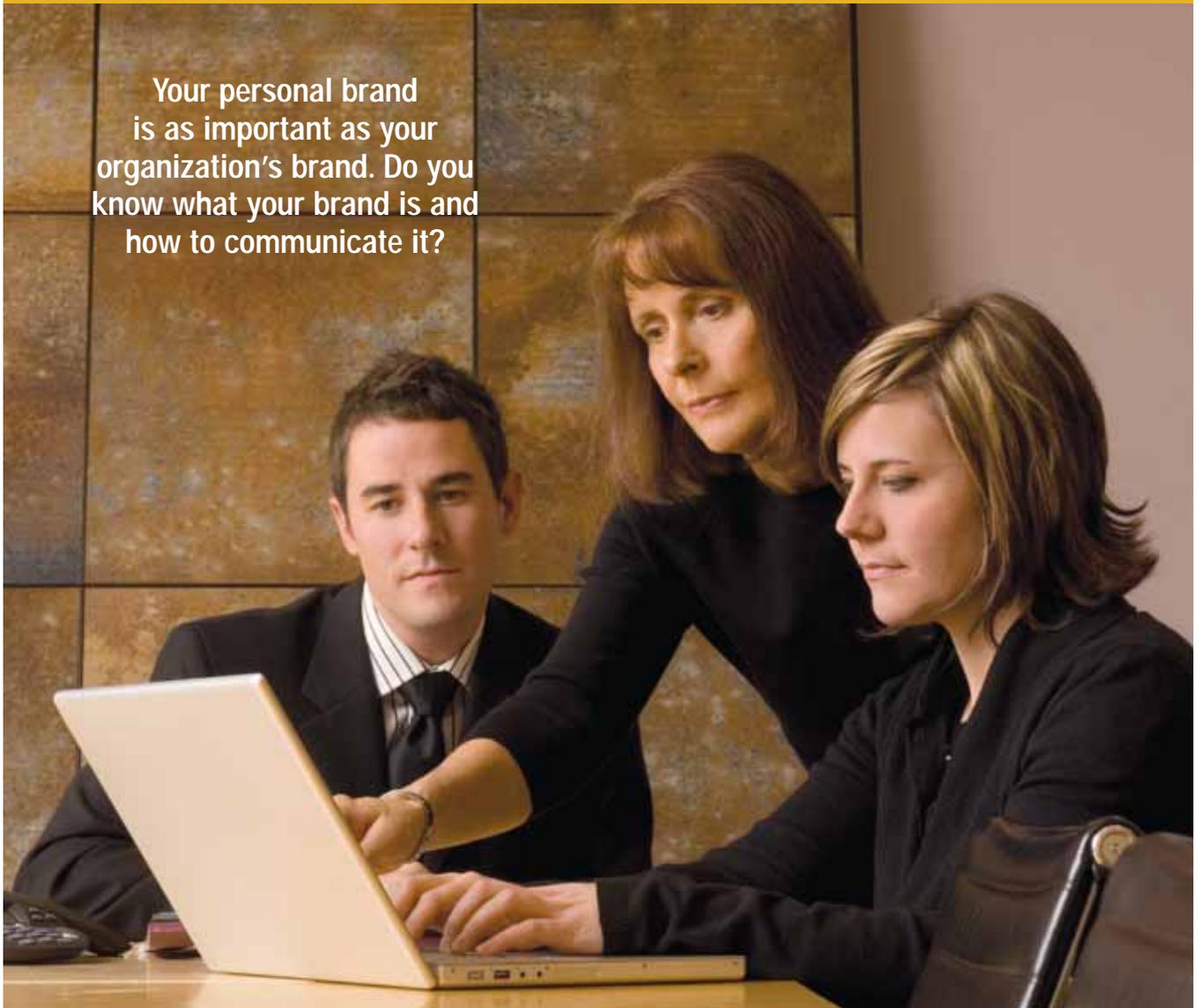


Defining Your Leader Brand

Your personal brand is as important as your organization's brand. Do you know what your brand is and how to communicate it?



By Michael Shenkman

Leaders know they must be beacons of constancy when it comes to proving to followers what they stand for. Thus, they often hire consultants and coaches to help them craft their leadership “style”—polish their image, find words to explain themselves, and hone behaviors that show empathy, despite how they really feel.

There's no doubt that successful leading does require a certain amount of theatrics. Leaders do need to portray their sincerity and passion for the endeavor.

Still, “style” is a feeble concept on which to base your leadership.

The leader brand is the key that unlocks energies for leaders and followers alike.

“Style” has more to do with temperament than vision, more to do with playing a part than creating collaboration, more to do with controlling your mood than building lasting relationships. In critical situations, your *true* style — temperament, attitude, mood, level of optimism, and determination —

comes through. And when the rubber meets the road, all attempts to merely play a role come crumbling down.

The leader's real work is to create followers. The leader meets people, then offers them something so meaningful that they decide to take a risk and venture into an unknown future. The test of being a leader is to create followers from a group of people who have many choices of allegiance available.

To do so, leaders need a brand. The leader's brand, like a product's brand, is a hallmark of trust. When

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Leader Brands that Work

A leader brand is a full-blown thought (not a slogan or catchword) of no more than seven words, expressing what followers feel will happen in their lives and in the world as a result of this leader. Here are examples of effective leader brands:

- **Become greater by committing to something greater.**
- **Focus energy to create meaningful change.**
- **Manifest our vision in all our actions.**
- **Create change, understand, adapt, and lead.**

you buy a Ford or Chevy, you expect certain things you value to be in evidence over the long haul. You believe an organization that brands its products will stand behind them. So too, the leader's brand connotes a relationship in which leaders prove themselves trustworthy every day. The brand carries the implication that if trust is broken, followers will go elsewhere with their ambitions, aspirations, and talents.

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How do leaders establish this trust? First, they clearly enunciate their plans: what the future will be like, what outcomes they envision. Then they invite people to decide if they're interested in the endeavor. When people respond, leaders must acknowledge the followers' needs and declare a willingness to meet those needs.

Followers are always anxious about the leader's intentions. They wonder: Where is this leader taking me? What will the experience be like? Will I learn something valuable in the process? The leader must meet followers halfway in

terms of answering these questions. Empty promises and inflated dreams of glory won't do — at least not for the kind of effective followers leaders want in their organizations. Since the goal may not be achieved (many quests aren't successful), and since people are likely to experience disappointment and frustration, it's the leader to whom they turn for a sense of the worth of the endeavor.

You can't fake a brand.

A leader brand is mental shorthand for this relationship. It must be something that's quickly grasped by all. In just a few words, it must capture the essence of the trust the leader promises. How do we know a brand works? We look for two things: viability and success. A brand is *viable* when followers can clearly recognize the leader whenever they hear the words. In fact, you can test brands in just this way. Read brand statements out loud, and ask people, "Which brand is that of your leader?" Or read your brand to a group of peers, and then refine the brand according to the critique you receive.

A brand is *successful* — and this is most important — when followers feel the brand expresses what it's really like, day after day, to experience the leader. When the leader walks into a room in which followers are waiting, is this the thought (or some variation of it) that people's minds snap to? If so, then this is a successful brand.

When a leader slips from the brand, the consequences are dire.

You can't fake a brand. It's just too difficult to pretend your leader stands for something it doesn't. When a leader slips from the brand, the consequences are dire: Followers leave, and the endeavor's energies flag. People feel betrayed when they discover that bold

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words are just a front. A brand is viable, therefore, only when followers feel it states what they actually experience from this leader — even when the chips are down. And it's successful, in the final analysis, when followers see that the leader is working hard to meet the demands of the brand.

When a brand is viable and successful, followers have the clarity and autonomy to act responsibly for the organization. They know what's at stake. They know which actions will be recognized and rewarded — and which won't. No one has to tell them what to do. The leader's brand encourages aspiration, sets out expectations, provides structure, and shapes a meaningful path on which to fulfill the dream.

With a good brand, the leader-follower relationship is clear and powerful, as is the path to accomplishing something worthwhile. The leader brand is the key that unlocks energies for leaders and followers alike. ■

Resources

Bosc, Joyce, "Brands: They Need to Work Just As Hard as You Do!", *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 1.

Jenson, Donna, "Sharing the Vision: Every Leader's Obligation," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 5.

Mason, David, "Secrets of the Charismatic Leader," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 4.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

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