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BE *your own* BRAND

A BREAKTHROUGH FORMULA
for Standing Out from the Crowd

An Excerpt From

***Be Your Own Brand:
A Breakthrough Formula for Standing Out from the Crowd***

by David McNally & Karl D. Speak

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1

Personal Branding

Becoming More of Who You Are

Ever get the feeling that people—even people who know you (or should know you) very well—just don’t “get” you? That they don’t quite understand who you really are and what they can rely on you to do for them?

Ever get the feeling that the relationships in your life—some of them, anyway—are a little out of sync with your ideals and what you really want? That you’re being forced to make choices, some of them uncomfortable, between who you know yourself to be and who someone else wants you to be?

Ever get the feeling that there’s a troubling disconnect—maybe only minor, maybe profound—between your personal life and your professional life? That the demands of your job, your career, your business, are in conflict with your values?

In every case described above, there seems to be a gap between perception and reality, between the “real you” and the you other people see and interact with. At work, at home, in the community, in life in general, you’re not getting as much credit as you think you should for who you really are and what you really believe. Somehow, it’s as though you are being asked—even compelled—to be less of yourself rather than more.

Businesses deal with this dilemma constantly. Their most successful responses tend to focus on one key concept—**brand**.

- Brand is how businesses tell customers what to expect. Things can change rapidly in the business world, and customers are more comfortable if they know what to expect.
- Brand is a familiar bridge across which businesses and their customers conduct transactions that lead to long-term and mutually beneficial relationships.
- Brand is the embodiment of what businesses and their customers value, the means through which businesses get credit for the quality they represent and deliver.

We think successful people can do what successful businesses do. The principles businesses use to “teach” their customers what to expect from their products and services can have powerful applications in both our personal and our professional lives.

From our more than twenty years in the business world, we know these principles, and we’ve developed techniques based on them—techniques that work. Our “day jobs” involve helping businesses with just these kinds of issues. More importantly, we’ve discovered that these same principles apply far beyond the world of business. Best of all, we know you don’t need an MBA to understand and apply these ideas. In the pages that follow, we’ll show you how to conceive, convey, and manage a strong brand—an accurate reflection of who you *really* are—in ways that will help you define and meet the expectations of the important people in your life. We’ll use business examples for illustration, but we won’t overdo arcane science. We’ll keep it short. We’ll keep it simple. We’ll keep it easy to apply in your own life.

What Exactly *Is* a Brand?

A brand is a relationship. It is not a statement. It is not a matter of contrived image, or colorful packaging, or snappy slogans, or adding

an artificial veneer to disguise the true nature of what's within. In fact, a “branded” relationship is a special type of relationship—one that involves the kind of trust that only happens when two people believe there is a direct connection between their value systems.

Success is not something the world can define for you. It's what *you* define it to be, based on *your* particular values and aspirations.

If those two basic premises make sense to you, there is an excellent chance that what follows will dramatically transform, for the better, the understanding you have of yourself and the relationships you have with the important people in your life: at home, at work, in all of the various communities to which you belong.

Dealing with issues that involve values can be a delicate matter. The word “values” has personal connotations in both the moral and the material worlds, and we have no ambition to take a stand in a pulpit, bully or otherwise. Yet, frankly, there's no other way to show you how to successfully build a personal brand than to connect it to your values.

Similarly, dealing with personal issues in conjunction with a powerful (and often misunderstood) concept from the business world can be equally dicey. Like “values,” the word “brand” is often misused, its true meaning lost in the technical stew of logos and product offerings and ad campaigns and marketing slogans.

We've put the information into an orderly structure (so you know what to expect). We're going to deal with brand and values in each context—business and personal—separately. Then we'll show you how to connect them in ways that can have a profound impact on your personal and professional life. You know a lot of this already. You've probably just never considered it in the context of a brand. You will.

- First, we'll define what we mean by brand and show you how, in business, a strong brand is systematically built and managed.

- Second, we'll show you the far-reaching personal applications of these brand-management fundamentals.
- Third, we'll offer more depth and detail on how businesses evolve their brands while making sure they remain true to their core mission.
- Finally, we'll show you how these advanced brand-management techniques apply to your own personal and professional relationships.

Brand Basics

In business, the concept of brand has a well-defined meaning:

A brand is a perception or emotion, maintained by a buyer or a prospective buyer, describing the experience related to doing business with an organization or consuming its products or services.

To put the idea of brand in a personal context, think of it this way:

Your brand is a perception or emotion, maintained by somebody other than you, that describes the total experience of having a relationship with you.

Everybody already has a brand. Your brand is a reflection of who you are and what you believe, which is visibly expressed by what you do and how you do it. It's the doing part that connects you with someone else, and that connection with someone else results in a relationship. In reality, the image of your brand is a perception held in someone else's mind. As that perception, through repeated contacts between you and the other person, evolves and sharpens, a brand relationship takes form.

The key to the concept, whether business or personal, is to understand the nature and needs of a relationship. Business success is seldom an accident, any more than personal success in life results from

some cosmic coincidence. Nor can either form of success be achieved in isolation. Both hinge on the success or failure of relationships.

In business, the principles and techniques of brand management allow organizations to focus on strategies and tactics that build strong relationships. The success of those relationships helps the business's products and services—and, behind those, the people who form the business—achieve an overall set of objectives. But this only works when the relationships meet the real needs of the people with whom those organizations do business: customers, shareholders, other stakeholders, employees, and the community at large.

Finding a “bottom line” for personal success is less clear-cut. The individual values and objectives of people are so varied. But no matter what your vision of life may be, the most critical component of your ultimate success or failure is the breadth and depth of your relationships. You want your family, your friends, your employer, and your coworkers to truly understand and fully acknowledge who you are and what you do. That's what will make those relationships mutually enjoyable and valuable. That's the essence of a “branded” relationship.

A branded relationship is a special one—in many ways, the most loyal kind of relationship there is. Many of the proven, successful loyalty-building ideas and tactics used by businesses in managing their brands can be brought to bear on your own personal relationships, with outstanding results. As you learn to understand and apply sensible, practical brand-development and self-management principles, you will gain tools you can use to create and progressively strengthen your relationships with the people you interact with on a regular basis.

By developing a strong personal brand that is clear, complete, and valuable to others, you will create a life that is much more successful and fulfilling. They win. You win. That's the kind of success that can have far-reaching benefits.

The Images Between

What does a personal brand, strong or otherwise, look like? How will people know it when they see it? Think for a moment of someone you know well professionally. How would you describe your relationship with that person? Is this someone with whom you can easily discuss a problem, or someone you'd probably avoid in a sensitive situation? Do you think of them first when you need help or expertise in a particular area, or last? Why does this individual stand out among the hundreds of people in your mental address book?

That is your brand perception of them—a reflection of who you believe them to be, based at least in part on what you think their values are. Their brand exists in your mind (just as your brand exists in theirs) based on who you've known them to be and what you've known them to do. It's how you judge them now and how you know what to expect from them the next time you interact. It may or may not be a perception they've consciously worked to create in your mind . . . but that's getting a little ahead of our story.

Now think of someone you know well on a personal level. How would you describe your relationship with that person? Again, is this someone in whom you can confide? Someone to turn to in times of trouble? Or someone to steer clear of when the chips are down? Why does this person have a special place in your thoughts and affections? All these perceptions reflect a personal equivalent of the same brand relationships we've learned to recognize and resonate with in business.

Quality and Quantity

Personal or corporate, brands are all around us—so much so that we often look right past them or take them for granted. Some brand experts say that strong brands can “hide in plain sight.” In other

words, when a brand is really, really good we take it for granted, just as we can take for granted those people who are very important in our lives, and yet we rarely take the time to consider why.

Whether we're aware of them or not, however, brands have tremendous power in our world.

- It's estimated that the average person in North America is exposed to more than three thousand brand messages each and every day.
- Across all categories, research shows people are willing to pay nine to twelve percent higher prices on average for a brand they know and trust compared to brands with which they may not be as familiar.
- Coca-Cola's brand is estimated to be worth about half the company's total market value.

Business considerations aside, however, what comes to mind when you think of the word "brand"? A color? A shape? A price? Maybe. But probably not. Instead, when you think about brands, chances are you think about whether you *trust* them or not, *like* them or not, *remember* them or not, *value* them or not.

Over the past two decades, when researchers have asked consumers what values they associate with brands, the number one answer is some variation on quality. Not quantity. Quality. And if you look for the dominant element in words like "trust" and "like" and "remember" and "value," you'll find it's a feeling, a strong emotional component.

Relationships have at their heart emotions—intangible attributes, not measurable ones. In the relationships that matter in your life, which rules, the head or the heart?

The heart, of course. When we flip the relationship coin, hearts invariably beat heads. Ideally, the emotions we feel (what our hearts are telling us) align closely with more objective measures (what our heads are telling us). But not always. Sometimes, in fact, the heart

defies the head and we cling to feelings, positive or negative, that defy rational analysis. That doesn't make those feelings any less real, or us weird. It makes us human.

Consequently, for people to relate strongly to our personal brand, their hearts as well as their heads have to be involved. And the more positive both the quality and the quantity measurements turn out to be, the stronger the relationship will turn out to be.

In life, as in business, the relationships that have the greatest value and staying power are the ones where positive emotions predominate. The relationships between parents and children, spouses, very close friends, and long-time mentors and protégés are by definition much stronger than those between casual acquaintances. The emotional content is the difference. And it shows.

Think about the most important relationships in your life, and you'll come up with senses or feelings—emotions. When you think of your spouse, your children, your parents, or your closest friends, there's as much emotional kick in the mental image as there is in the simple objective label: "Oh, that's my dad, my mom, the love of my life, my kids, or my best buddy from college or the Navy or the team at work." Special relationships have emotions tied to them. That's what makes them so special.

Small wonder that really great brands, whether personal or product, transcend the quantifiable to conjure up powerful emotions, especially positive emotions. When a business brand achieves that status, it has real power. And when a personal brand builds similar linkages to the heart as well as the head, it too has real power.

Try this: If your best friend, spouse, or partner were a brand, what brand would they be and why? Conversely, if they were asked to describe you as a brand, what images would they come up with? Are you a Honda (efficient, reliable, functional) or a Maserati (exciting, exotic, spontaneous)? A Ritz-Carlton (high-amenity, attentive, elegant) or a Motel 6 (simple, unpretentious, efficient)? A Harvard

(intellectual, demanding, teaching professional skills) or a KinderCare (safe, nurturing, teaching formative skills)?

Each is a strong, valuable brand. Each can be the appropriate brand for a given set of circumstances, yet an inappropriate brand in other contexts. Whether it's right depends on the needs of the relationship, not the intrinsic nature of the product or service. You wouldn't send your high-achieving teenager to KinderCare or your four year old to Harvard. You can sleep like a baby at a Ritz-Carlton or a Motel 6, but your choice between the two may depend on whether you have a tight budget or a lavish expense account. Both a Honda and a Maserati have four tires, seats, and a steering wheel—and both can be satisfying to drive—but which one you want depends on whether you're going to a Grand Prix or the grocery store.

One Really Nice Guy

For Karl, a good example of a strong personal brand is Dr. Chip R. Bell. He's an author, a trainer, and a consultant. He has a well-developed sense of humor, an engaging Southern drawl, and a depth of expertise that extends from customer service to leadership and the protocols of great partnerships. But most importantly in this context, Chip Bell is a nice guy.

“So what?” you may say. The world is full of nice guys. Big deal.

No, Chip Bell is a *nice* guy. Chip Bell embodies an off-the-chart exuberance for life. To anyone who has come within the gravitational pull of his personality, he is the poster boy for contagious enthusiasm. Chip Bell radiates an active, assertive, outgoing friendliness into a room. A couple of years ago, he and Karl partnered on a consulting road trip in the Pacific Northwest, and Karl still clearly recalls witnessing dimensions of enthusiasm he had never suspected existed.

By his actions and example, Chip Bell inspired Karl—and undoubtedly a lot of other people—to take the personal brand com-

ponent of optimism and enthusiasm to a whole new level. People do that to us periodically. They take something we believe is one of our own greatest strengths and redefine it right before our eyes, simultaneously transforming it and us.

But what makes Chip Bell such an extraordinary example of a strong personal brand to Karl is the sheer genuineness of his behavior, from the moment he greets you to the moment you part. When you look into Chip Bell's eyes, he's completely there. In that moment, the connection he makes has a power and a relevance that transcends anything else that's going on in the room.

Did Chip Bell set out to be the nicest, most enthusiastic guy on the planet? Not at all. He's not engaged in a competitive endeavor. Nor is it a function of his actions alone. Rather, Chip Bell *values* friendliness—values it extremely highly—and that, in turn, dictates his outgoing, involved behavior.

It's an amazing thing to stand next to and watch Chip Bell. There's no self-consciousness. No sense of pretense or artifice. In other words, Chip Bell's **authenticity** (a word we'll come back to at some length later) is so apparent that the impact it has on others is immediate and lasting.

Your values and habits may not be the same as Chip Bell's. Nor should they be, if his brand doesn't contribute to an accurate reflection of who *you* are. But when you can indelibly imprint yourself on the mind of someone else, you've arrived as a strong personal brand.

The Power of Two (and More)

So far, what have we established?

That brands are valuable to businesses. That relationships turn on their emotional content. That actions spring from and tie back to values. And that somebody named Chip Bell is a really nice guy.

Most importantly, we hope you can now clearly see that a brand reflects a perception or emotion maintained *in somebody else's mind*.

This is an area where perception is reality. It doesn't matter nearly as much what you think. It matters a whole lot what *other people* think. Your brand, just like the brand of a product, exists on the basis of a set of perceptions and emotions stored in someone else's head.

The good news about a perception or emotion is that once locked in place, it has tremendous staying power. Just as highly personalized perceptions and emotions stick with a product, they stick with a person. Their staying power is what gives a relationship its resilience. Once people accept the basic values of a brand, they judge their subsequent experiences with it against that norm—they interpret the actions they experience or observe in the context of the values they believe to be at the heart of the brand.

- If you make a mistake or fall short of fulfilling a promise occasionally, the previous reliability of your strong personal brand is there to reassure people. They'll discount the out-of-kilter action as a one-time exception, an aberration, because they trust that the underlying values are still in place. (Of course, fall short on a regular basis and people will undoubtedly begin to revise their value assessments.)
- When you go above and beyond someone's expectations, on the other hand, the brand relationship becomes even stronger and more cherished. The values people believe are at work below the surface magnify the effects of the actions, with corresponding effects on the depth and strength of the relationship. Again, the more often that happens, the greater the impact.

Building a personal brand is a lot more than a weekend project. For all of the talk about first impressions, brand strength actually comes from repeated impressions — impressions that, as we'll see in the next chapter, clearly stand out in the specific context of the relationship.

Getting Down to Business

What's the primary benefit to *you* of developing a strong personal brand? We think it's that you get to be more of who and what you are, not less. In other words, you get to live your values—to be acknowledged and receive credit not only for what you do but also for what you believe. You end up, therefore, feeling a whole lot better about life in general because—in essence and in fact—you are being true to yourself. That, to us, is the essence of personal success.

Building a strong personal brand can be very challenging, especially when you begin to apply brand-management principles in a world where so many different kinds of relationships define our lives.

In the next two chapters, we'll take a detailed look at the art of branding in modern business, with some initial observations on how to apply these principles on a personal basis. In the chapters that follow, we'll use the wisdom of the business form of branding to illustrate what makes *people* memorable, indispensable, invaluable, trusted, and desired—what happens when their actions connect back to their inner values. From this foundation, we'll then show you how you can use advanced branding techniques from the world of business to take your own personal brand to a much higher level with the people who matter most to you.

2

Personal Brand Characteristics

Distinctive, Relevant, and Consistent

To make personal branding work for you, you need to understand how a business brand works. The principles and ideas developed and successfully used in business over many years are readily adaptable to building a personal brand.

For starters, since your brand is a perception maintained in someone else's mind, how others see you is the central issue. A strong brand, corporate or personal, needs to be so clearly defined that its intended audience can quickly grasp what it stands for. For a business, the audience is its customers. For a personal brand, it is those with whom we have (or want to have) relationships.

Three key components combine to determine the strength of a brand. Strong brands are

- **Distinctive:** they stand for something. They have a point of view.
- **Relevant:** what they stand for connects to what someone else considers to be important.
- **Consistent:** people come to believe in a relationship based on the consistency of behaviors they experience or observe.

In Chapter 1, we discussed how a brand is a relationship and how that relationship develops from emotional connections. You make and maintain those emotional connections by being distinctive, relevant, and consistent. In other words, when your actions are distinctive, rel-

evant, and consistent, your intended audience begins to see and understand your brand.

Let's examine how the application of each component affects the relationships in your life.

Strong Personal Brands Are Distinctive

Your brand starts to become *strong* when you decide what you believe in and then *commit* yourself to acting on those beliefs. At that very point, you begin to separate yourself from the crowd. Here's why: Making a commitment means doing what you said you would do despite the obstacles. As your beliefs are not always shared by another, standing up for and holding to them is often a courageous act, and courage of this kind is none too common in our world. That, by definition, is distinctive.

To truly understand what it means to be distinctive is to learn that it implies much more than just being different. Brand building is not image building. It is not selling yourself to someone else. It results from understanding the needs of others, wanting to meet those needs, and being able to do so while staying true to your values.

As we'll see in greater detail in Chapter 4, clarifying, understanding, and acting on the basis of values is a core building block in the art of developing a strong personal brand. For now, suffice it to say that your values are the beliefs you hold to be true, the principles by which you live your life. They include what you're interested in and what you're committed to. They influence how you prioritize competing demands.

Your values affect not only what you think and feel but also how you behave. In fact, how you act on your values distinguishes you from the crowd. As people observe your actions, they make judgments about why you do what you do. Those judgments then become the perception of you they carry around with them. The more distinctive

the actions they see, the better defined your brand becomes for them. In other words, personal brands connect and grow strong when they focus on meeting the needs of others without sacrificing the values on which they are based.

We cannot emphasize enough, therefore, that a strong personal brand is not some kind of veneer—something painted on to present a more pleasing appearance. It is a reflection of those ideas and values that are distinctively you. This is the only substance upon which a truly lasting relationship can be built. The lesson:

Your personal brand is based on your values, not the other way around.

Strong Personal Brands Are Relevant

Being distinctive is not the only thing that matters to someone else. What you stand for needs to be relevant to them. Relevance begins when a person believes that you understand and care about what's important to them. It gains strength every time you demonstrate that what's important to them is important to you. The synergistic effect of being both distinctive and relevant is what ignites the power of a personal brand.

Relevance is often a function of circumstances. Parents are naturally relevant to their children, for they are the caregivers and protectors of those children. The relevance of one spouse to another extends far beyond the bonds of a marriage contract: the actual relevance occurs when both people in the marriage are concerned about and committed to each other's well-being.

Relevance is what distinguishes a friend from an acquaintance. A coworker may be only relevant to the degree that what they do affects what you do, whereas a mentor's support and interest in your career and future makes that relationship far more valued and lasting than

an ordinary relationship with a fellow employee. Your relevance to a client or customer is determined not only by your product or service but by how it (and you) can proficiently solve their problems and meet their needs. The more relevance you demonstrate, the stronger your brand becomes to them. That is why strong brands always attract attention: they attract the most attention from those who find them the most relevant.

Building relevance involves a skill we call “thinking in reverse.” If you want to be considered valuable to others, you must move out of your world into theirs. Your first concern is to determine their needs and interests. Then you have to connect those needs and interests to your own personal strengths and abilities. The sages throughout the ages have said in many different ways: “Before you can get what *you* want, you must first help others get what *they* want.”

That means relevance is a process. It starts with questions. What do *they* want? What do *they* need? What do *they* value? What do *they* expect? When you have a sense of someone else’s needs and their frame of reference, that information allows you to guide your actions in ways that will make you relevant. Which leads us to the fact that there is a strong aspirational element involved in being truly relevant to others. *Webster’s* defines “aspiration” as “a strong desire to achieve something high or great.” Most people would be pleased to hear that someone had described them as a “great person.” But people don’t tend to hand out that label randomly. The lesson:

Relevance is something we earn by the importance others place on what we do for them and by their judgment of how well we do it.

Strong Personal Brands Are Consistent

The third component in building a strong brand is consistency—doing things that are both distinctive and relevant, and doing them

again and again and again. Consistency is a hallmark of all strong brands. As a brand, you only get “credit” (acknowledgment, acceptance, or recognition by others) for what you do consistently. Consistent behaviors define your brand more clearly and concisely than the most polished and practiced patter.

- McDonald’s is a fast-food icon because, regardless of the location you visit, the hamburgers, cheeseburgers, and Big Macs it serves are the same, again and again and again.
- Whether you are a regular guest at a Ritz-Carlton or a Motel 6, you go back to their properties on a regular basis because you know you can depend on them to consistently deliver what they promise.
- In the American public’s consciousness—even for people who have never met them and may not like or even agree with them—figures such as Ralph Nader, Gloria Steinem, Rush Limbaugh, Maya Angelou, Ronald Reagan, and countless others stand as strong personal brands based on the consistency of their actions. In other countries and cultures, the list of names changes but the stature doesn’t.

Which strongly branded public figures an individual labels admirable and which ones they label not so admirable will vary based on point of view. Everyone defines distinctiveness in their own terms. Each public figure’s relevance to your needs and values will also vary. But like them or not, need them or not, you feel you know what to expect from these people because their behavior has been so consistent over so many years.

In a relationship, consistency is established by dependability of behavior. Over time, people learn that they can trust you if they experience consistent trustworthy behaviors. In the absence of personal experience, they may decide to trust you because of what they have learned of your track record from others. Your previous actions—not

your intentions—lead them to believe that you can be counted on to behave in a similar way again. And every time you behave the way they expect, you reinforce the strength of your brand with them. Trust grows.

Conversely, the quickest way to diminish and ultimately destroy someone's trust is to become inconsistent. No matter how high the highs may have been, roller-coaster behavior will work against the long-term prospects of any relationship. The lesson:

Consistency is the hallmark of all strong personal brands.

Inconsistency weakens brands and suspends belief.

The Power of Example

Some people live decades and never really achieve a lasting impact on the people around them. Some leave a lasting legacy based on just a few short years. The latter group has brands that stand the test of time, even though time itself is denied to them in any great amount.

An excellent example is Canadian Terry Fox, who was the subject of David's award-winning film, *The Power Purpose*. At the age of eighteen, he was diagnosed with bone cancer. His right leg was amputated six inches above the knee, and he spent a long time in the hospital in recovery and rehabilitation. While there, he was moved by the suffering he saw all around him—so moved that he decided to do something about it. Three years after losing his leg, he vowed to run across Canada to raise money for cancer research. His goal: Raise at least one dollar for every man, woman, and child in the country—over twenty-four million dollars.

He started in mid-April, dipping his artificial foot in the Atlantic Ocean. During the next 143 days, initial casual interest turned into a national phenomenon. Terry Fox was running forty-two kilometers (over twenty-five miles) a day. On September 1, just east of Thunder

Bay, Ontario—two-thirds of the way to the Pacific and over fifty-three hundred kilometers from his starting point—his run came to a premature end. His cancer had returned. He died the following June, one month before his twenty-third birthday.

Terry Fox lived, however, to see what many had described as the “impossible” fundraising goal of twenty-four million dollars reached and exceeded. He raised twenty-eight million dollars.

Those who knew Terry were quick to say that he was no saint. But he showed a tremendous integrity about why he was running and what the money he raised was going for, and he would not allow anyone to muddy the waters. He made sure that all of his expenses were covered by sponsorships or contributions so every dollar donated actually went to cancer research. He made every step count.

That was in 1981. Today, Terry Fox Runs are held in more than sixty countries, from Albania to Zimbabwe. The extraordinary legacy he left—directed now by the Terry Fox Foundation in Toronto, Ontario—has raised more than a quarter of a billion dollars for cancer research. In 1999, a national survey conducted by the Dominion Institute and The Council for Canadian Unity found that in the minds of his countrymen, Terry Fox is Canada’s greatest hero.

Our journeys through life may not be as dramatic as Terry Fox’s, but when our values lead to distinctive, relevant, and consistent actions, the effects we have on the world around us can transcend the limits of time and place and transform the lives of others.

Climbing the Brand Ladder

Because of the dynamic nature of a relationship, the process of being distinctive, relevant, and consistent has some subtle shadings. Each interaction builds on the one before it and sets the stage for the one that will follow. As the relationship deepens and grows, it acquires a history—a breadth and depth that takes on increasing significance over time.

When you look back to your first experiences with someone important in your life, do you find yourself marveling at how little you knew about each other? From the perspective of time and experience, you can see that your relationship now exists at a much higher level. It's as though you'd been climbing a ladder, with each rung taking your relationship to a new level.

In business, the concept of **brand ladders** is used to determine how, through repeated encounters, distinctive product and service features connect with the relevant emotional needs and values of customers. The purpose is to ensure that depth and breadth is being built in the relationship. Each step leads to another, gradually getting closer to the emotional core that makes for enduring relationships.

When you open a checking account, your brand-based expectations for choosing one bank over another are likely to be pretty simple. "Keep my money safe for me until I need it. Send me a clear, accurate statement periodically. Be open enough hours and in enough locations to make it convenient for me to do business with you."

Those are lower rungs on the bank's brand ladder. But then one day you need something more—a mortgage, a loan for a new car, or a savings program for the kids' college fund. Now the bank's brand connection has a chance to move up your emotional ladder. You likely place a different—and significantly higher—value on your home or your children's future than you do on your checking account. As the bank justifies your trust at this higher level, the brand connection moves up a rung.

The same dynamic works on a personal scale as well. We start by finding out what is initially distinctive and relevant to someone else. What are their values and beliefs? What do they stand for? What do they need from others in a relationship? What, in particular, do they need from you in the beginning stages of your relationship?

The brand connection grows as you use this knowledge to progressively work your way up their ladder of ideas, desires, and values.

The experience and insight you gain as you move up the scale allows you to better understand the higher-level benefits and emotional rewards they derive from connecting with you consistently. First contacts often are tentative: neither person involved is quite sure what to expect. As our relationships move to higher levels of emotional connection, we seem to instinctively know what someone needs from us, and often don't have to think twice to provide it.

When a mother or father asks a child at dinner, "Is your food okay?" they want to make sure things taste right. That's a lower rung on the brand ladder of "parent." But an enthusiastic—especially an unsolicited—"Wow, this is really good. Thanks!" says a lot more than that the meal is okay. It says that the child values the time spent on her behalf, which makes Mom or Dad feel appreciated. That's a higher step on the ladder.

When that feeling of being appreciated is relevant to what people believe are their responsibilities, a much higher level of connection has been achieved. Their values are reinforced—which means that, in our example, finding the time to be together at mealtimes is likely to continue to be an important part of building the relationship between parent and child.

Some Reflections on Building Your Brand

Because of the back-and-forth nature of a relationship, a commitment to being distinctive and relevant to others has important carryover effects for you. Determining ways to be relevant to others reflects your desire to learn and grow. This, in turn, is expressed by continually creating, solving problems, and making things better for others and yourself.

But because someone else determines whether you're effective at brand building or not, your relevance to that person is ultimately their decision. And sometimes the connection just simply won't be there.

You won't always get along with everybody. You can't. Nobody can. Your values, however distinctive, simply won't appeal to everyone. Neither will they be relevant to everyone. You can't be all things to all people, nor should you try to be.

So one key determination you need to make in building your brand is how relevant other people are, or can be, to you. If you're going to be true to yourself and be acknowledged, accepted, and recognized for who you really are, your core values must be respected in each relationship, not compromised. To think you will never leave someone dissatisfied runs counter to the idea of a strong personal brand. So you also have to decide if any particular relationship is worth the effort.

Clarity in relationships is a key advantage of a strong personal brand. As your brand becomes better defined, people find it easier to figure out where you stand and, consequently, what value you can represent for them. They'll learn to respect your values because it will be clearer to them that those values are of utmost importance to you. As a result, they won't expect you to act in a way that contradicts those values. The payoff for you is that the number of conflicts in your life will likely diminish.

Strong vs. Moral

Brand building is not the same thing as morality in the spiritual sense—though there are, to be sure, a lot of common elements. Everyone knows people who have clearly defined brands as well as character traits and behavior patterns we (or others) may find anything from mildly distasteful to absolutely horrifying.

Think, for example, of convicted mobster John Gotti. Strong brand? Absolutely. People who knew him knew exactly what he stood for, what his values were, how he could be counted on to act in a given situation. Did that make his brand attractive? To some people (those

to whom his distinctive actions and values were consistently relevant), yes. To most, no. In essence, it was strong for all the wrong reasons. But in selected relationships, he clearly established a strong personal brand.

The actions that someone else values highly may not be as relevant to you, may not be valued by you, and may even be or seem contrary to your own needs and desires. So you assign a lower, more negative value to that individual's personal brand—at least as *you* experience it. Yet sometimes everyone has to acknowledge that the individual in question is succeeding in building strong personal brand relationships with others.

Stand for Your Brand

Not all brands are attractive to us. Your values are *your* values. Our values are *ours*. We won't presume to judge them against a universal scale of right or wrong. Figuring out the “right thing” for you—that's *your* job.

When your actions and your behavior reflect your values, the result is integrity. The pieces fit. The picture you present to others is in focus, not blurred around the edges or incomplete. As stated above, we'll come back to values clarification at greater length in Chapter 4. For now, though, it is vital to appreciate that acting in concert with your values not only affects your relationships with others, it also has a highly positive effect on your relationship with yourself.

For purposes of this analysis, the “right way” to go about building a strong personal brand is to make sure your brand resonates and is relevant, in the most distinctive way possible, for those people with whom you want to build strong relationships on a long-term basis. The “wrong way” is not to develop a distinctive, relevant, consistent brand at all—to base your behaviors on inconsistent, ever-shifting values that aren't clear to you or anyone else.

As noted earlier, building a strong personal brand takes courage—because consistency takes courage. You not only need to be clear about what you believe, you need to be willing to base your actions on those beliefs time after time, no matter how great the temptation may be to compromise those beliefs. The way to make a distinctive, enduring, positive impression on someone else is to ensure that who you are, what you say you are, and what that person experiences from you are the same, time and time again.

To see that in greater detail, we're going to explore a three-dimensional model for understanding how people perceive your brand.

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A Breakthrough Formula for Standing Out from the Crowd***

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