



Executive Brand Leadership

By Karl D. Speak



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Although senior executives provide the spirit and the discipline for building strong brands, they don't need to be tactical brand managers to understand whether or not their organization is delivering their brand's promise. What they do need to know, however, are the right questions to ask. When advertising and marketing managers discuss brands they frequently speak in a nomenclature that impedes communication with senior management. By asking the right questions, brand-aware executives learn whether or not their managers' efforts consistently fulfill the brand's promise and they become steadfast guardians for these important corporate assets.

Executive brand leadership is a management tool senior managers need to lead their organizations. Successful, brand-savvy executives cultivate five key tenets of brand leadership:

- Understand the organization's core brand - building strengths.
- Ensure that the organization's brand possesses a distinctive point of view.
- Encourage a well-structured set of brand identities.
- Establish consistency as a priority in communicating the brand's voice.
- Build brand leadership throughout the organization.

Tenet 1: Understand the Organization's Core Brand-Building Strengths.

Organizations with strong brands have one thing in common: they build enduring, loyal relationships with their customers. All successful organizations master the discipline of building distinctive relationships in their marketplaces. What differs

among them are the core strengths each organization develops for achieving these coveted relationships. Some organizations become excellent in building and growing trade or sales-force-based relationships. Others foster attractive relationships based on their outstanding product development skills. Certainly, there are organizations whose superior marketing skills allow them to create consistently strong demand from their end users, the consumers.

In approaching brand management, executives need to understand that most organizations demonstrate an inherent bias toward one or several methods in their relationship-building skills. Relying too much on one core competency, though, is dangerous and ultimately weakens long-term brand-building power. For example, some organizations develop strong product brands at the retail level because they direct efforts into their relationships with retailers.

Their confidence in these relationships often results in the organization placing less emphasis – and fewer resources – on consumer brand-building competencies. Companies practicing these



confining strategies become vulnerable to changes in their one-on-one relationship with the retailer.

One-dimensional brand strategies ultimately weaken the organization's relationships with its retailers. Clearly, the challenge is to achieve balance within each organization's brand-building skills. Companies with the strongest brands use a balanced approach, carefully coordinating their many different relationship-building competencies to serve the broader brand promise.

Tenet 2: Ensure that the Organization's Brand(s) Possesses a Distinctive Point of View.

The strongest, most admired brands share three common elements. The brands are:

- Distinctive - they possess a point of view
- Relevant - they appeal to their target market
- Consistent - they communicate a uniform message

Great brands are distinctive. They have a point of view on what they do and how they relate to their customers. Loyal customers admire industry-leading brands and respect their point of view. World-class brand management starts with a clear definition of the brand. The organization documents and thoroughly understands the brand's core dimensions and emotional appeal to its targeted consumers. Thus, an important task of every executive is to challenge the organization to define clearly the brand's point of view and work to ensure that the brand's distinctive platform continues to shine.

A brand's point of view relates to its customers. Senior executives also need to encourage their organizations to make distinctive, bold "brand

statements" in everything they do. The brand's point of view must be obvious and universal. It must appear in everything from product design to customer service.

Consistently serving the brand's point of view is one of the most difficult tasks for any organization. Brand-savvy executives must constantly monitor their organizations to ensure that all initiatives and endeavors intended to serve the brand actually do so.

Tenet 3: Encourage a Well-Structured Set of Brand Identities.

More often than not, organizations assemble a messy collage of product names, creating a confusing system of brand names for their products and services. Whether these activities spring from poor judgment, inattention to details, or brand management ignorance, ultimately they dilute the organization's brand-building activities. Moreover, they also create hidden inefficiencies in the marketing communications budget.

Very few organizations can afford to build very many brands. At the same time, product marketing without the intent of building a lasting brand equity is truly "old economy" thinking. Executives need to challenge their marketing teams to commit to a clearly identified brand identity framework. Most companies need to define specific marketing policies that discourage the development of new brand names. Developing new names not only takes valuable time and resources, but usually results in the targeted customers encountering a confusing landscape of new relationships. Rather, companies ought to marshal efforts to capitalize on their current brand's equity by developing new products that strengthen and serve it. Building a



strong brand is hard enough; there is no room for inefficiencies.

Tenet 4: Establish Consistency as a Priority in Communicating the Brand's Voice.

Consistency is the hallmark of all strong brands. An integral part of creating a loyal, trusting relationship with customers is the consistent communication and actions that surround a brand. A major challenge facing most organizations is how to balance the need for fresh, poignant brand communications while maintaining a consistent brand voice. Integrated brand-based marketing communications is a requirement for effective brand communications.

Successful brand management requires a set of tools, such as corporate identity guidelines, packaging style guides, advertising creative briefs, or print design templates, that reinforce consistency in brand communications. But they alone are not enough. Consistency is a discipline. Unfortunately, creating clear, distinctive brand building communications cannot be achieved just by following rules or pre-conceived formats. Balancing the need to create strong brand statements with a disciplined consistency requires well-seasoned judgment.

The judgment and wisdom surrounding a brand reside within each organization's brand champions. A brand champion, or brand master, is a high-level manager who intuitively understands the brand and skillfully discerns its character in all brand communications. While senior level executives don't have to be the brand champion, they do need to ensure that one, or several, exist in their

organization. Above all, the senior executive must recognize consistency in brand communications when he/she sees it, and always demand it from his or her organization.

Tenet 5: Build Brand Leadership Throughout the Organization.

Brand building is everyone's job. At the core of all strong brands is an organization with a set of strong, shared values. It is difficult to find a strong brand that is not supported by energetic and passionate employees who care about the values behind the brand. Great brands achieve their equity from this fundamental belief system.

Executive brand leaders need to inspire, motivate, and empower employees to become brand champions.

Brands are experiential. Before customers commit their brand loyalty, they want to see and feel the commitment behind the brand. Thus, the organization's human resources ultimately becomes its most powerful brand building weapon. Brand believers

find hundreds of ways to make the right decisions about a brand – day in and day out.

Dramatic brand moments happen intuitively. Beliefs and commitment start at the top of every organization. Executive brand leaders need to inspire, motivate and empower employees to become brand champions. An organization that is charged up about its beliefs, vision and brand will always find hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of ways every day to make significant brand impacts that advertising alone can never buy. Brand leadership is an executive responsibility because, ultimately, great brands are built not on words, but actions.

About the Author

Karl D. Speak is a consultant who delivers powerful insight and practical advice on brand management issues. At the foundation of his experience and knowledge are his activities connected with Brand Tool Box, Ltd., the company he founded in 1984.

Karl has implemented his contemporary approach to brand management with a wide range of corporate clients, such as Allina Health System, United Healthcare, Honeywell, Cargill, Marshall Fields, American Airlines, Federal Express, ING, Qwest, IBM, US Bancorp, Pillsbury Company, AT&T, Motorola, Skandia, The Scotts Company, Stanley Tool Works, *The Wall Street Journal*, Walgreens, 3M, Sony, and Target Stores.

Karl recently co-authored a book titled *Be Your Own Brand*, which has been translated into nine languages. This book introduces personal branding and how successful people have learned to consistently act out their personal values to make a difference in relationships throughout their lives. This book provides practical advice and how-to's for individuals to be more successful by being "more of who they are, not less."

As an accomplished presenter, Karl speaks to many different types of audiences around the world. His energetic style and wide reaching knowledge of brand management make him a favorite speaker with executive teams. Karl has trained hundreds of marketing professionals in the discipline of brand management in corporate training seminars, in addition to his teaching at University of Minnesota, College of St. Thomas and University of Westminster.

About Brand Tool Box, Ltd.

Brand Tool Box is a publishing and training resource providing organizations and individuals with informational tools and training workshops to improve their brand management competency. For 20 years Brand Tool Box has provided brand management consulting services to some of the world's most respected companies.

The purpose of Brand Tool Box is to provide executives and marketing professionals with practical brand management tools to address real-world brand management challenges.

Brand Tool Box has a comprehensive curriculum of brand management training workshops and internal brand-building programs. The training workshops include a very popular workshop for executive teams, professional development curriculum for marketers and workshops designed to build alignment between organizations and their employees.

Brand Tool Box's innovative approach to its internal brand-building programs is being implemented in organizations around the world.



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