



Leveraging the Power of Personal Brands to Build a Stronger Professional Services Brand

By Karl D. Speak



Leveraging the Power of Personal Brands to Build a Stronger Professional Services Brand

By Karl D. Speak

Let's get to the point: this paper is designed to help you navigate your way to the bottom line of making brand management work in your professional services firm. Certainly I can't provide you with an entire schematic for the process in the short space of this paper. However, I will pass along a roadmap developed from the cartography of lessons learned from my many years of experience.

There are three important waypoints in the journey to consistently building a stronger brand for a professional services firm. The first is to clearly understand that making brand personal with everyone in the firm is fundamental to brand building in professional services. Secondly, it is important to adapt the brand management discipline to address the peculiarities of the professional services business model, not the other way around. Finally, it is imperative to design and implement a brand management process that is practical and involves everyone in the firm.

Waypoint #1 – In Professional Services, It's All Personal

The professional services business is personal in many different respects. For starters, it's about the personal skills of the individuals providing the services. And for sure, sustained success for the firm is dependent upon strong personal relationships between a client and the partners and associates of the firm. The personal and professional relationships between all the associates of the professional services firm have an important impact on the quality of the work that is performed. This overarching importance

of personal relationships is the distinguishing feature that makes brand building different for professional services firms. It is an important reason why traditional brand building tactics have a strong tendency to fall short in building a distinctive brand for a professional services firm.

Brands are Relationships

If success in professional services is steeped in personal relationships, what's the connection with brand? A brand is a relationship. The focus of brand management is to build loyalty. Brand loyalty is personal on all accounts. Customers' respect for the values of a brand (product or organization) is the basis for their enduring loyalty. Making brand management personal is a key to building brand equity.

A brand is a relationship that is personal in many different venues. In consumer goods, it is the relationship between an individual and a product. To be successful, the brand manager must give the product personal qualities. When it comes to business-to-business products and services, brand loyalty exists between an individual buyer and a company. The challenge here is to ascribe a set of values or qualities for the company that

are respected by the individual buyer. In professional services, it is the relationship between the individual client and the professional services individual that is the foundation for brand loyalty.

The underlying structure of any professional services firm's brand is the "personal brands" of each of the members of the firm. The brand equity of a professional services firm is the sum total of the personal brands of all of its associates, especially its partners and key associates. Learning to be a personal brand is a

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.



In a professional services organization, the brand *is* the people.

fundamental skill for everyone in the firm. Orchestrating and aligning the personal brands within the firm and ultimately fostering each individual's growth will produce real brand building leverage for the professional services firm.

What is Personal Brand?

Personal brand is a relatively new concept, especially as it relates to its use in building organizational brands. The ideas and processes presented in my book, *Be Your Own Brand*, in many respects are groundbreaking in helping individuals define their brands. Enabling individuals to define and grow their brand is a powerful step in engaging them in the brand building efforts of the firm.

What is a brand? More importantly, what is a personal brand? In business, the concept of brand has a well-defined meaning:

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 evolves and sharpens, a brand relationship takes form through repeated contacts between you and the other person.

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.

Building a strong personal brand has many things in common with building a strong business brand. Combining a strong personal commitment with a well-conceived personal brand framework is the key to building brand



equity. Just as a product brand grows best when it is on the right shelf in the right store, a personal brand will grow fastest and strongest in a work environment where an individual can make important contributions that reinforce their values and strengths.

In *Be Your Own Brand*, I describe a proven process to define and grow a personal brand. The first step is to develop a personal brand manifesto. The second involves adhering to the ten rules of brand building. Finally, it is important to always measure your brand equity. Individuals must be able to define and understand their brand using language and concepts similar to those used to define their employer's brand. The use of a common brand language is a vital element that supports the alignment that is necessary for both brands to grow.

Waypoint #2 – Professional Services Firms Have a Unique Personality

Before we launch into the role of personal brands in building the brands of professional services firms, let's look at the nature of the beast. With brand building in mind, step inside a professional services organization and you quickly realize you're not in Kansas anymore! It's an understatement to say that building a brand for a professional services firm has its own peculiarities. At the risk of over-simplifying the differences, let's examine a few of the key driving forces:

Brand or Brands? By and large, professional services firms are comprised of a group of different offices or practice areas. Moreover, these different units are run by a senior partner(s) with a localized focus and plan for growth. Although this autonomy and segmentation has proven its worth for growth, it creates special challenges for brand building. In particular, there is a tendency to build localized brands based upon the vision of each office's partners. This distributed quality of the firm creates two brand-building challenges. Multiple offices operating under a common brand name will produce the type of inconsistencies that detract

from the marketing leverage of having a singular brand. By the same token, the local offices or business units are less productive in building their brands (sub-brands) because of the inherent lack of coordination with the brand building efforts and competencies of the firm's centralized marketing department.

Show me the Money. Whether during robust growth times or economic slowdowns, there is an acute focus on fee generation. Certainly the focus on growing the top line is not unique to professional services. All the same, this attention to the short-term can, and most likely

does, compromise the long term. Translated into brand terms, the attention to the short-term *transaction* may cause certain conflicts with longer-term *relationship* building efforts.

Brand Strategy in Pictures. Some firms communicate a sigh of relief when their graphic standards are created and communicated to all the offices and they start to see a consistent look and feel in proposals, advertisements and business cards. "Yea! Our brand strategy is completed and implemented." A consistent looking veneer will pay-off when and only when the brand is strong to the core. A strong brand is developed from the inside of the firm. The brand on the outside is only as strong as the brand on the inside. A slick, seamless veneer can provide a false sense of confidence for the firm. It may fool the partners, but clients can easily see through to the core.

Brand as Iceberg. Many, if not most, professional services firms have one thing in common – the brand of the firm is a reflection of the personal brand of the key partners. If the firm has a collective brand, then by definition it is bigger than any partner. But that does not minimize the impact of the senior partners on the brand of the firm. For a whole host of reasons, starting with leadership, the personal brand of each key partner will have a big impact on the firm's brand. But too many firms (and their partners) have a misguided belief that the partners have a disproportionate impact on the firm's brand. The partner's impact on the firm's brand will either be leveraged or diminished by the personal brands of every other associate working in the firm. The true leverage of each partner is disproportionately impacted by what's below the surface.

Most importantly, brand building is different for professional services firms because it is a lot

Success Factors for Professional Services Brand Building

- Alignment among the key partners or senior managers on the vision and values of the firm. The brand strategy process is a very effective tool to strengthen the alignment among the leadership team.
- The ability and track record of the leadership team to work together on firm-wide issues. This is very important for firms with de-centralized practice areas.
- The brand building power of any organization comes from a disproportionate number of key players. The firm's ability to identify and mobilize these nodes of influence throughout the organization is a sizeable predictor of success in brand building.
- Overall cultural strength and team building. The stronger the culture, the better prospects for brand building. In fact, the strength of the firm's brand is directly tied to the strength of the culture. The brand on the outside is only as strong as the brand on the inside.

In reality the above "success factors" are not binary, they're a matter of degree. The commitment to a brand building discipline will result in growing brand equity faster. Like any other business discipline, a well-understood process and a commitment to a common objective is always more efficient.

more personal. There are many things we have learned about building brands for products, but that knowledge develops little traction until we can make it work on a personal level. Leveraging the synergy of the personal and firm brands will result in real speed and momentum that can be used to gain competitive advantage.

In reality the power of brand management will pay off for professional services firms by implementing a process that integrates the collective wisdom and vision with the vitality of each personal brand in the firm.

over. The objectives of this activity are: create a common language about brand; expand the participants' understanding of brand beyond the marketing or business development function; connect the brand process to key strategic issues facing the leadership team; explain the brand-building initiative and their role in it; be real and practical about the benefits of building an even stronger brand; and leave the meeting with a commitment for their involvement. In my experience conducting many of these types of sessions, success is achieved by minimizing the "brand-babble," explaining concepts using real-world examples from a variety of products and



Your employees' personal brands – who they are and what they stand for – make a significant impact on your organizational brand.

Waypoint #3 – Building a Professional Services Brand

Without a commitment to a practical process, brand building will fall back on the shoulders of key partners and associates. The firm will rely on the personal brands of relatively few people. They will get tired and disenchanted. The firm will gain no leverage and will ultimately fall behind competitors in building a stronger brand.

The process of building a stronger brand for the entire professional services firm has the following key activities: engage the leadership team; create a brand infrastructure; create strong personal brands; unleash the power of personal/firm brand synergy; and on-going communication inside and outside the organization.

Engage the Leadership Team. The first step in an effective brand-building initiative is to engage the leadership team. For many, this seems to be a hurdle that is very difficult to get

services, and clearly connecting the beliefs and actions of every individual with the ultimate strength of the firm's brand.

Create a Brand Infrastructure. The keystone of every strong brand management effort is a set of definitions that clearly articulate the distinctive qualities of the firm. This set of guiding principles, known as a brand management infrastructure, is a very precise set of words that describes how the firm's unique qualities will provide distinctive value to its clients.

An important objective in defining a brand management infrastructure is to translate the firm's internal strategies and values into a proactive relationship strategy. Suffice it to say, the language and mindset used to develop and grow external relationships is different from the words used internally. Therefore, developing a vital brand strategy starts with the core truths of the organization, but translates into a relationship strategy that meets the important qualities of being distinctive from competitors, relevant to



The stronger the personal brands, the stronger the firm's brand.

clients, and consistently delivered. *It makes sense that the efficacy of the brand strategy will depend in large part on the strength of the firm's business strategy and the commitment to its values.*

I have found that a well-structured brand infrastructure is strongest when it is built upon a set of interlocking and coordinated definitions. Following is a brief description of the elements of a robust brand infrastructure:

- **Brand Ethos** – a single enduring value that has proven itself as the differentiating factor for the organization.
- **Brand Vision** – this is a statement of the firm's long-term (three to five year) vision of how it will provide value to its clients.
- **Core Values** – a brand strategy must be grounded in the firm's commitment to its values.
- **Brand Position** – this statement provides partners and employees with a concise set of words (elevator pitch, if you will) to describe the distinctive qualities of the firm. The brand position statement has a 12 to 24 month perspective and must be in tune with current competitive offerings and market requirements.
- **Brand Dimensions** – brands are based upon perceptions and the brand dimensions clearly articulate the brand impressions that are necessary to earn the desired brand position. The key here is to define the impressions in a brief, coordinated fashion: the impressions of what the firm does – its competencies; the distinctive qualities it delivers in every relationship – its brand standards; and the

consistent qualities that every client can expect in every interaction – the brand style.

Brand Tool Box® Business Brand Model
© 1995-2008 Brand Tool Box, Ltd.



- **Brand Promise Statement** – this is the most important element in the entire brand infrastructure. This is a short, five to ten word statement that functions as the singularly most important guiding principle to engage everyone in the firm to “live the brand.” A brand promise defines how the firm's most distinctive quality will make a substantial difference in every client relationship. The brand promise becomes the energy behind the firm in making a distinctively positive difference in every client relationship.
- **Brand Character** – because relationships are personal, to make the brand infrastructure personal it is important to give the firm's brand human qualities. This is a very important exercise because it completes the translation of the business strategy into a relationship strategy. This is a two or three paragraph description that will be used to add further dimension to the brand for all the employees of the firm, as well as to guide communications efforts.



Every firm creates brand impressions everyday by everybody.

The brand infrastructure will become the cornerstone of the firm's on-going brand building efforts. It has been my experience that the leadership team will develop a stronger consensus as a result of developing the brand infrastructure. This benefit alone is worth the effort.

Create Strong Personal Brands. A professional services firm's core brand building assets are the personal brands of every associate, especially its partners. Therefore, a successful brand building effort must start with a process to build the personal brands of each person in the firm. This can be accomplished through a training exercise that is interesting for each individual and easy to implement. In a nutshell, the training can be accomplished with a short training session, accompanied by a pre-work assignment.

The training is sub-divided into three modules: introducing the participants to the concepts of personal brand; conducting individual exercises where each person defines their personal brand manifesto (a format for practically defining their brand values); and using group exercises and discussion groups to discover how each person's brand can be used to apply their brand values in a way that helps them develop stronger relationships and subsequently grow their own brand in the process.

The training is very engaging and, in most cases, sends a strong signal to each employee that the firm understands the value each person brings to the success of the firm.

Unleashing the Power of the Personal/Firm Brand Synergy. Brand building is a continuous process that requires a constant flow of energy and commitment. The power of brand building comes first and most

noticeably from key players in the firm, and is ultimately supported by everyone in the firm. Unleashing the power of collective personal brands in the firm will have two important benefits. The firm's brand will become stronger, and each individual's personal brand will be nourished and become stronger. The stronger the personal brands, the stronger the firm's brand.

Will the Benefits Outweigh the Effort?

I have coached many, many organizations through this process. I won't mislead you – it takes effort and commitment. But this type of process doesn't have to be complicated to understand or implement.

But is it worth it? What can you expect from your commitment to invest in a brand building effort? The pay-off will differ by firm, but here are just a few benefits you can expect:

- Clarity of the firm's values, vision and core strategy, and commitment of the leadership team.
- Confidence that a project will be more consistently implemented, requiring less time of key partners or project managers to resolve client issues.
- More likely to attract client assignments that best fit the strengths of the firm.
- More efficient business development efforts. Your brand infrastructure will provide you with language to better position the firm in new business proposals. A stronger brand can often times be the intangible that serves as the tiebreaker in winning new assignments.

- Engaged employees will be more likely to find unique ways to create brand moments – interactions with clients that make a real impact on the brand.
- The firm’s brand will be less dependent on a few key players. The result will be a stronger brand for the firm.
- The core values of the organization will be strengthened, providing longer-term brand building effectiveness.
- The firms with the strongest brands are more likely to attract the best talent in the category.

Bottom line - no matter how you define success, an initiative to build a stronger brand will pay dividends today and in the future. In my opinion, it’s not a matter of *if* a professional services firm should focus on brand building; it is *when* and *how effective* the organization will be at building and using its brand equity. Every firm has a brand – it is a matter of how well it uses brand management to elevate its relationship-building competency within the firm.

Relationship management is rapidly becoming a core management competency in professional services. Brand management is the only proven business discipline for managing and leveraging relationships as assets.

Build a stronger brand. Your clients depend upon you having a strong brand. Employees expect it. Competitors will envy your brand. The difference your brand can make is limited only by the indifference you show toward brand building.

Unleashing Internal Brand Power

- Create Excitement – a launch event that announces the firm’s commitment to building a stronger brand. The key to a successful event is to make sure it emphasizes the brand on the inside and not some superficial element of the brand, like a new logo or advertising campaign.
- Establish Brand Leaders – key brand leaders should go through two to three hours of training emphasizing the importance of growing personal brands and linking them to the brand strategy of the firm. The participants will work as a group to identify brand coaching opportunities and key messages that will become themes in all leadership communications.
- Engage All Personal Brands – this training event will become the cornerstone of a firm’s brand building success. The key is to provide a training experience that builds on the personal brand training by demonstrating the linkage of the strengths of the individual’s personal brand to the brand strategy of the firm.
- Recognize and Reward Brand Moments – there is little doubt that recognition and reward are key motivators in changing behaviors. The key to brand building in a professional services environment is reinforcing distinctive relationship building behaviors. Reward and recognition programs are not tricky or new. The key is to develop and implement a program that is consistent with the firm’s culture and internal brand.

No matter the scope and breadth of a brand-building program, the commitment and energy behind the program will be the true success factors.

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, including Allina Health System, UnitedHealthcare, 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*, 3M, Sony, and Target Stores.

Karl recently co-authored a book entitled *Be Your Own Brand*, which is currently available in bookstores nationwide. 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. *Be Your Own Brand* 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, University of St. Thomas and University of Westminster.

About Brand Tool Box, Ltd.

Brand Tool Box, Ltd. is a unique professional services organization melding world-class brand expertise and organizational development best practices to help organizations improve their brand-building competency. We know brand inside and out. More importantly, we know how to make it real for any and all types of organizations. We don't design logos or create advertisements – we provide valuable insights; develop powerful strategies; and enhance our clients' corporate brand-building competency skills. Since 1984, our clients have benefited greatly from our singular focus. Everyone at Brand Tool Box is committed to delivering *ingenious solutions* that build loyal relationships.



510 First Avenue North, Suite 605
Minneapolis, MN 55403
612.338.5009
612.338.4714 *fax*
www.brandtoolbox.com
info@brandtoolbox.com