

Aligning the personal brands of the partners and associates of a professional services firm is the most important strategy to build a strong brand for the firm.



Leveraging the Power of Personal Brand to Build a Strong Professional Services Brand

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Building a strong brand for a professional services firm is different. Too many firms have spent too many marketing dollars on brand building with little brand equity to show for it. Meanwhile, a number of professional services firms have developed very strong brand equity while under-spending their competitors on marketing. The difference has more to do with culture and less to do with marketing.

Brand Truth: Organizations with the strongest brands have preferential access to the best opportunities. Being successful with the best opportunities has the effect of supercharging the growth of a brand. Strong brands grow stronger, faster.

It can be easily argued that brand (reputation) is more important in professional services than any other category. It's not for trying that many professional services firms have a difficult time in building a stronger brand. In too many cases, professional services firms, consciously or unconsciously, enable brand building to focus on the brand with the least leverage and overlook the focus on brand building that offers the most leverage. Building a stronger brand doesn't have to be difficult and doesn't require a big marketing budget.

There are three important parts to a framework that supports consistently building a stronger brand for a professional services firm: using the power of brand alignment to build a strong brand for the firm by leveraging the personal brand strength of the key partners; gaining clarity and consensus on the differentiating quality of the firm with a focus on the keystone values and beliefs that are steeped in its legacy; designing,

implementing, and sustaining a brand-building process that is an ongoing dual approach that couples building a strong brand inside the organization and using marketing activities to highlight the firm's distinct qualities.

Brand Building In Professional Services Is 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 can fall short in building a distinctive brand for a professional services firm. With that said, there are a number of important analogies between fundamental brand principles and building a brand for a professional services firm.

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

When It's Personal, It Changes Everything

Many of the accepted brand-building principles can get turned on their head when applied to professional services. Mixing in the impact of personal brands requires a new perspective on brand building. As an example, the decision about which brand identities to promote is very different for professional services firms when compared to traditional product brand strategies.

Generally accepted traditional brand-building practices dictate that an organization make a decision of how to focus its brand-building resources between their product brands and corporate brand. In essence, the decision boils down to the organization deciding if it wants its customers to be loyal to its product or the company or maybe some of each. Implicit in that decision is making a judgment about which brand mix will enable the organization to build the strongest brands, yielding the most marketing leverage. The ultimate mix of brand identities is known as the “corporate brand nomenclature system.”

Integrating the role of the “personal brand” into the brand identity mix creates a whole new brand strategy paradigm for professional services firms. This changes the two-brand identity model (product and corporate) to a three-brand framework (practice group, firm, and personal). For professional services firms the brand mix is tantamount to deciding where a client’s loyalty is better placed: with a key professional working for the firm, the firm as a whole, or a specific practice group. For most firms, with the exception of very

small firms, the most prudent approach is a measured combination of the personal brand of the key professional and the brand of the firm, with certain considerations allocating some brand equity to a practice group entity. What’s most important is that the brand identity framework be a conscious, strategic decision.



Conventional wisdom has it the underpinnings of any professional services firm’s brand are the “personal brands” of each of the members of the firm. Additionally it should be understood that the brand equity of a professional services firm is the sum total of the personal brands of

its partners, associates, and staff – especially its senior partners and key associates. Learning to become a strong personal brand is a 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.

Recognizing the strategic importance of the role of personal brand in professional services, although fundamental, is not a breakthrough, but having access to a practical set of business-oriented personal brand tools is the innovation that will empower firms to unleash their brand building potential.

What is Personal Brand?

Personal brand is a relatively new concept, especially as it relates to its use in building organizational brands. The business-oriented concepts and processes presented in my book,

Be Your Own Brand, laid the groundwork for organizations to proactively integrate personal brand into their overall brand building strategy and activities. The concepts comprising personal brand are straightforward and are intuitive to understand. Following is an overview of the key concepts.

What is a brand? More importantly, what is a personal brand? 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.

A personal brand is defined as the set of perceptions maintained by others that describe a person's distinctive qualities.

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 platform. The second involves leveraging the three simple rules of personal brand building. Finally, it is

important to always measure your personal brand effectiveness. 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.

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

Four Blocks of Professional Services Brand Building

Building a framework for sustainable, consistent brand building rests on gaining commitment across the firm to four decisions: agreeing on the distinctive qualities of the firm; how many brands the firm will build; how the brand will be presented in the market and; requiring brand alignment of the partners across the firm.

Distinctive: Who, not What. Every professional services firm has a differentiated quality that resides inside the organization. Some firms understand it and it is understood across the firm. For other firms it may be latent or unconsciously understood by some. It may be unwritten and understood differently by different groups within the firm. In the worst case (too many, I'm afraid) the firm has no sense of its differentiating character and wonders why its fees are under pressure and margins likely suffering. In the best of cases a firm's differentiating quality(ies) acts like an ethos and permeates itself across partners, associates and staff.

How do you discover a firm's differentiating qualities? There is a defined process for that matter, but short of that here's a hint. It's not

likely defined by "the what" (profession or practice line) the firm does. It may be found in the outstanding qualities of "the how" the firm delivers its services. It can most likely be found by examining "the who" (values and beliefs) of the firm or more likely of its founders or keystone partners. Being perceived to be distinctive in the marketplace starts with a belief inside the firm that there is something special in the way it practices its profession and serves its clients.

Brand or Brands? By and large, professional services firms are comprised of a group of different offices or practice groups. 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-

Success Factors for Professional Services Brand Building

Creating alignment among the key partners or senior managers on the vision and values of the firm. The brand strategy process can be 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.

building efforts and competencies of the firm's centralized marketing department.

Don't Settle for Just a New Logo. Some firms view brand building as getting a new logo and they start to see a consistent look and feel in proposals, advertisements and business cards. 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.

The primary purpose of marketing communications is to help clients and potential clients "connect the dots" between the firm's performance and its differentiating qualities. This type of cognition helps answer the question "why is this firm so good at what they do?" Making those perceptual connections adds credence to the work the firm delivers and helps establish a reputation for its distinctive qualities.

If a client or potential client can create some understanding of the differentiating qualities of a professional services firm, they become real. Helping clients articulate their understanding or feeling will provide them the language to describe the firm in the differentiating qualities that set the firm apart. Consistent and articulate communications from the firm (and more powerfully from a client) are very important brand-building support pillars.

Alignment = Brand Strength. Many, if not most, professional services firms have one thing in common – the brand of the firm is a reflection of the personal brands 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 partners' 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 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.

Building a Professional Services Brand Strategy

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

Create a Brand Platform. The keystone of every strong brand-building effort is a set of definitions that clearly articulates the distinctive qualities of the firm. This set of guiding principles, known as a brand platform, 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 platform is to translate the firm's internal strategies and values into a proactive brand 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 clients, and consistently delivered.



Brand Tool Box® Business Brand Model
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I have found that a well-structured brand platform 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 platform.

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 distinctive 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.

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 Promise Statement – this is the most important element in the entire brand platform. This is a short, five to ten word statement that functions as the singular 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

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 of partners and practice leaders will be the most important success factor.

the firm in making a distinctively positive difference in every client relationship. The brand platform 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 platform. 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 divided into three modules: introducing the participants to the concepts of personal brand; conducting individual exercises

where each person defines their personal brand platform (a format for practically defining their values, brand dimensions, and brand promise); and using group exercises to understand the firm’s distinctive value and how they make a difference for clients. Participants also 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 platform 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 for your professional services firm. Your clients depend upon you having a strong brand. Partners, associates, and staff expect it. Competitors will envy your brand. The difference your brand can make is limited only by the indifference you show toward brand building.

About the Author

Karl D. Speak is a global expert known for his pragmatic and unconventional approach to using brand as a leadership platform for gaining customer loyalty and employee engagement. Karl's innovative work on corporate brand strategy, personal brand, and internal brand building has been implemented in companies in 23 countries.

His best selling book, *Be Your Own Brand*, is translated into 12 languages and has sold over 80,000 copies. In January 2011, a revised and expanded version of *Be Your Own Brand* was released to leverage the global success of the first edition and the growing popularity of personal brand.

Brand Tool Box, Ltd., the company he founded over 27 years ago, is the global leader in developing and implementing internal brand-building programs. It is a unique professional services organization melding world-class brand expertise and organizational development best practices to help organizations build and nourish customer-centric culture alignment.

Through Brand Tool Box, Karl has implemented his contemporary approach to brand management and internal brand building with a wide range of corporate clients. Clients such as 3M, LeadingAge, American Express, AT&T, BASF, BMW, Cabela's, Cargill, Consumers Energy, EDMC, FedEx, Honeywell, IBM, ING, Mosaic, Motorola, Securian, Skandia, Sony Corporation, St. Jude Medical, Syngenta, Target Corporation, The Scotts Company, The Wall Street Journal, Toro, and Walgreens have

benefited from Karl's consulting and internal brand-building programs.

As an accomplished presenter, Karl speaks to many different types of audiences around the world. His energetic style and wide-reaching knowledge of brand make him a favorite speaker with corporate audiences of marketing, sales, and executive teams.

Karl holds a Masters Degree in Economics from the University of Minnesota. Karl teaches in the MBA programs at University of Minnesota, Saint Thomas University, and has been guest lecturer at University of Westminster in London, Capella University, EADE University in Madrid, among others.

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. 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.



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