

# 1 Personal Brand: The Perception That You Made a Difference

Let's get straight to the point. Everybody already has a brand. Your personal brand is a perception held in others' minds, and it has evolved through their interactions with you. Through repeated contacts between you and another person, his or her perception of you sharpens and your brand in that person's mind becomes clearer. In other words, people are constantly observing who you are, what you do, and how you do it. Having a brand is not the point: more important is the question, How *strong* is your personal brand? The strength of your personal brand grows or weakens depending upon the consistent impact (positive or negative) you are making on other individuals. Want to be a stronger brand? Make a difference!

Ever get the feeling that people—even people who know you (or should know you) very well—just don't "get" you?

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?

Ever get the feeling that there's a troubling disconnect—maybe only minor, maybe profound—between your personal life and your professional life?

In every case described above, a gap seems to exist between the "real you" and the you other people see and interact with. At work,

at home, in the community, in life in general—it seems that you’re not getting as much credit as you feel you deserve for what you contribute and what you truly believe.

The framework of personal brand management set out in this book is designed to enable you to shift others’ perceptions so that you can be acknowledged and receive credit for who you are and the difference you make for others. At the base of this framework is a set of simple principles (which we refer to as “personal brand basics”). In this chapter, we will explain two of these three principles: the role of perceptions and the importance of making a difference in relationships.

Understanding these two simple, commonsense principles of personal brand will make it possible for you to immediately start building a stronger brand.

However, before we’re off and running, let’s make sure we agree on the definition of “personal brand.”

A personal brand is a perception or emotion, maintained by somebody other than you, that describes your outstanding qualities and influences that person’s relationship with you.

A strong personal brand does not result from a contrived image, colorful clothing, snappy slogan, or from having put on an artificial veneer to disguise the true nature of what’s within: A strong personal brand describes a person who chooses to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others and who builds trusting, valued relationships. A weak personal brand describes a person whose attributes and perceived qualities lack clarity, and more importantly, someone who is not perceived to extend him- or herself to make a difference for other people.

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 do they never come to mind? Why does an individual stand out among the hundreds of people in your mental address book?

One of David's colleagues, Sue Stanek, describes how she is consciously evaluating individual personal brands by noticing how she thinks when she passes fellow workers in the office. Looking at one, she might say to herself, "You really make my life easy!" Looking at another, she thinks, "You really make my life difficult." Sue's bottom-line judgments are a reminder of the importance of making a positive difference if you want to be perceived as a strong brand.

Now think about the more intimate relationships in your life, and you'll experience distinct, and often deep, feelings. When you think of your spouse, partner, children, parents, or closest friends, there's a real emotional kick to the mental image, "Oh, that's my dad," "my mom," "the love of my life," "my kids," or "my best buddy from college/the Navy/the team at work." Special relationships have emotions tied to them—that's what makes them so special.

The brands of the important people in your life exist 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. Their brand is how you judge them now and how you know what to expect from them the next time you interact. Your perceptions may or may not match what they've consciously worked to create in your mind . . . but that's getting a little ahead of our story.

### **One Really Nice Guy (and a Strong Personal Brand)**

For Karl, a good example of a strong personal brand is Dr. Chip R. Bell, who is 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.” Chip Bell is a *nice guy who makes a difference*.

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. He radiates into a room his active, assertive, outgoing friendliness. 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 component 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 why Karl finds Chip Bell such an extraordinary example of a strong personal brand is the sheer genuineness of his behavior—from the moment Chip 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 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, and his effect is not 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. He has 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 in chapter 4) is so apparent that its impact on others is immediate and lasting. Chip Bell's brand of exuberance and passion for life rubs off on other people and changes their day—and maybe their perspective on life. Chip Bell is an excellent example of a strong personal brand.

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.

It's fair to say that most people have a similar perception of Chip Bell, and that's the beginning of being a strong brand. The other quality that makes him such a strong brand is that he uses his distinctive qualities to make a difference for others as often as possible. This brings us to linking the first principle, the power of perceptions, to the second principle, making a difference. (The third principle will be the subject of chapter 2.) The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to providing you a practical understanding of these two important concepts.

### **“It Isn't What They Say About You, It's What They Whisper”**

**—Errol Flynn**

When it comes to your personal brand, what *you* think doesn't matter, but what *other people* think matters a whole lot. Your brand exists on the basis of a set of perceptions and emotions stored in someone else's head.

The good and bad news about how others perceive you is that once locked in place, perceptions have tremendous staying power.

Perception is reality. Sound familiar? Most people have heard this simple aphorism. Yet it is reasonable to assume that although many people understand that other people have certain perceptions

about them, too few people make the effort to proactively manage the perceptions they leave with others. Why is that? Some people are confident they will leave the right impression. Other individuals feel it is too difficult to influence what others think. And still other people claim they don't care about what others think of them. Frankly, we know from asking thousands of people—they're not sure exactly what perceptions they want to leave.

An important competency of building and growing a strong personal brand is to harness the power of perceptions. If others' perceptions define our personal brand, we need to be purposeful about managing the perceptions we leave with them. Let's be clear that how people perceive us has a significant impact on how they relate to, and react to, us. And, in some cases, their perceptions may impact whether they will even take the time to meet with us. So, to leverage our personal brand and make the most of our relationships, we must improve our competency of managing the perceptions we create.

Even with our best intentions of managing others' perceptions of us, it is not easy. Commonly we view ourselves one way while others have a very different perception of us. Can you imagine, or do you know, someone who takes pride at being a hard worker—while other people perceive him or her as a workaholic? Who's right? How does that difference in perceptions impact their relationship? How about the person who is proud of being well informed but who others see as a know-it-all? Whose point of view matters more? In the end, the perspective others have of us will clearly bias how they perceive and relate to us.

There are many reasons why a difference exists between how one perceives oneself and how one is perceived by others. We each have a unique set of lenses through which we view others, so to speak. Each person's lenses are colored by life's experiences, attitudes at the time, and how the person feels about him- or herself at a partic-

ular moment. The result is that a person's actions or words may be interpreted differently by various other people or at different times. Building a strong brand requires a level of wisdom and flexibility to ensure that one's actions and words consistently reinforce the way one wants to be perceived. No one said building a strong personal brand didn't take some effort!

Misperceptions can also result from a certain plan of action not turning out as intended. Now let us give you an example: A young lady (Sally) in her early twenties went home to her mom and told her that she and her fiancé wanted to save some money to buy a house before getting married. She asked her mom if she could move back home to save money, and her mom said, "Well, how long will you be here?" Sally looked disappointed because she took her mom's comment to mean she wasn't welcome back home. Mom was thinking that if Sally would be home for a minimum of six months, Mom could put her back on the family's car insurance and save her daughter even more money. But that's not the perception Sally was left with, and it took time to reassure her that her mom understood her situation and wanted to help.

The third point to keep in mind about perceptions is that people sometimes base them on our actions and other times by what they judge as our intentions. In either case, perceptions are what matter. Perceptions define our brands. And we all must hold ourselves accountable to the perceptions we leave—not to our intentions or solely the actions we take.

So what's the bottom line, and why should anyone work so hard to manage the perceptions others have of them? It's all about the gap: The size of the gap between the way you want to be perceived and the way you are perceived by another person will have a big impact on the general tenor and productivity of the relationship. A narrower gap supports a productive and enjoyable relationship. Conversely, a wider gap results in a relationship that will require

more effort to accomplish things, and interacting may not be as much fun.

### **It's Not About Being Different, It's About the Difference You Make**

The second principle of personal brand is centered on the importance of using your special qualities to make a difference. Strong personal brands thrive by finding ways to contribute and make a positive difference for others. Although this concept is uncomplicated, we explain it because it is a most important principle to understand.

The perceptions others have of you are directly related to how much of a difference you make for them. The bigger the difference—positive or negative—the longer the perception remains in their minds. When you make little or no difference for someone, his or her perception of you evaporates faster than you might think. Think of how many people you have interacted with over the past two weeks. How many can you recall? How clear or complete are your perceptions of them? It's safe to say that the number of people you remember and the number who left you with a clear set of perceptions is a fraction of your total interactions. How many people would recall their interactions with you because you made a discernable difference?

### **It's a Whole New Social Networked World**

Social media, as we know it today, was nonexistent when *Be Your Own Brand* was first published. It is a huge understatement to say social media has profoundly changed the way people interact and relate to other people. In a personal brand context, this brave new world greatly impacts the way people make impressions and are

perceived by others. The social networked world has added a new dimension to building and managing a personal brand and the perceptions that define it. In this revision of *Be Your Own Brand*, we provide critical insights about how to use the power of social media to build a stronger personal brand.

For starters, a myriad of different tools exist (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, blogs, Flickr, YouTube, MySpace, Ning, Classmates .com, Friendster, orkut, Multiply, and Match.com, to name only a few) to represent your personal brand in the social media world. The many and diverse social media tools allow you to broaden the awareness of your brand across a much larger audience, with many different segments. These tools vastly transcend the possibilities of extending your personal brand across many audiences in the real world (by which we mean the nonvirtual, not-online world). Using a portfolio of social media tools to proactively extend your personal brand offers exciting brand-building opportunities and, of course, challenges.

Hyperlinking, tagging, linking within networks, social bookmarking, SEO strategies, sharing, and becoming “friends” are all examples of tools that catapult and enormously expand the potential for creating perceptions of your personal brand in the social media world. Ideally, people self-direct and manage the power of social media tools to grow their personal brand. But experience suggests that world is not so clean or controlled. Perceptions of your brand can be influenced by someone else—and without your permission.

There has always been gossip in the real world, but the social media world is gossip on steroids! Then there is guilt by association, so to speak. One of personal brand management’s axioms is “Your brand is known by the company it keeps.” It is a lot easier for people to “associate” with you, and without you knowing it, in the social media world.

The other potential of using social media tools is the enormous

number of extra possibilities to make a difference for someone. Sometimes with only a few keystrokes you can contribute something of value to someone else. Because of the power of the linked network, you may have a chance to encourage, empower, assist, or help to make a difference for someone you have never even met.

The social media world offers opportunities (and some pitfalls) to building a stronger brand than was ever imagined when we first created the concept of personal brand. We provide specific examples and suggestions for using social media tools and strategies to build a stronger brand in chapter 9.

### **Feelings Create Lasting Perceptions**

*“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”*

This profound aphorism attributed to Maya Angelou has real, important meaning for personal brand building. When you make a truly positive impact on another person, you leave them with a warm feeling. Strong feelings create lasting memories. Making a positive and distinctive difference for someone is the surest way to become a strong brand.