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Who are you? A look at personal brands



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In a nearly 30-year-old song given new life as the opening theme for a popular television crime drama, British rockers The Who ask a perennially puzzling question: "Who are you?/Who who?/Who who?/I really want to know." It's a query strategic account managers most definitely *do not* want their customers asking about them, and establishing and managing a personal brand is the best way to ensure that never happens.

Right now you're probably thinking, "Brand? What am I, Coke? I don't need a brand." In fact you already have one. It is formed whether or not you want one. In a sense personal branding is like office

politics: You're involved in it even if you'd rather not be.

Just as with corporations, a personal brand provides your reputation, says David D'Alessandro, former CEO of John Hancock Financial Services Inc. In an American Airlines Inc. article, he says, "People pay less attention to their personal brands because they believe other people are going to take care of it for them. And they don't realize that every day – with every action, every inaction – they are building a reputation for themselves, AKA 'brand,' that other people will use to help them or hurt them."¹

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Share and share alike

There is in fact a demonstrated correlation between a SAM's ability to influence a customer's business decision and the wallet share he is able to claim with that customer. In essence, mind share translates into wallet share, and mind share is what a brand is all about. Because it is at root a concept, defining "brand" can be an imprecise exercise, so it might help by looking at what most people seem to inherently recognize as corporate or company brands. This is one way to look at it: Brand is the image, identity and values that a company, product or service conveys to its customers. Brand is the place where a particular company's strengths intersect with a customer's general perception of the company.

is the total experience a customer has whenever she interacts with a company.

Likewise, a personal brand is based on the experience a stakeholder has when she interacts with a SAM. It is connected to the promises you make and keep and is the singular image of you that your name triggers in the mind of your customer.

Some important points to remember about personal brands are that:

- Every person has one;
- Some are stronger than others;
- They're not just about personality;
- Big benefits are associated with strong personal brands; and
- Successful SAMs consciously build and manage their brands over time.

"Gold-level" personal brands increase a SAM's visibility and access to customer accounts, bolstering his perceived added value. Think about certified Gucci handbags, for example. Why do people pay more for a real one than a knockoff? Even when the competing product is of high quality, the price differential can be astonishing. What you're really paying for is the brand name.

A powerful personal brand can generate positive buzz as well as stakeholder loyalty. Customers and colleagues alike find themselves talking about that last great sale you made, and a sense of loyalty based on past successes provides a little leeway in the wake of a misstep or two. "When a person who is perceived as honest and hardworking ... makes a mistake ... they get a pass because they have built up credibility," D'Alessandro notes. "You'll be forgiven if (your colleagues and superiors) like you and think well of you."

That same influential brand will help convert neutral coworkers and customers into a SAM's personal entourage of evangelists. Slow adopters – people on whose radar you hitherto were not – will begin to notice that a lot of customers and coworkers ask to work with you, and they'll wonder if they haven't been missing something. To convince them they have indeed been missing something, SAMs need to pay attention to building and managing their own personal brand pyramids. The process begins with defining your brand attributes, then turning them into a personal brand promise, and finally developing the kind of tagline with which you'd like customers and coworkers to immediately associate you.

If your professional antennae just went up, by the way, you can retract into safe mode. The suggestion here is not that you have your business cards reprinted to introduce yourself as S.A. Manager, superSAM. This particular tagline is purely psychological. You want clients to see S.A. Manager but think superSAM.



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A brand is a singular idea that a company owns in the collective mind of its customers, and a key sign you're dealing with a brand is when its form as a proper noun is used in place of a common word. Instead of asking for an imported beer, for instance, you ask for a Heineken. Rolex is the first thing that comes to mind when you decide to shop for an expensive Swiss watch, and the first stop in your search for the ultimate driving machine is the local BMW dealership. Ultimately, a brand

In good company

Just what are the benefits of a strong personal brand? In many respects they're the same as those associated with strong company brands. Increased mind share for businesses can lead directly and indirectly to shorter sales cycles and improved stock valuation, allowing an extension into new markets and a high perceived value that opens the door to premium pricing.

From the bottom up

An effective personal brand pyramid is built on a foundation of desirable attributes, and if you've been doing the job for a while you already may lay claim to at least some of the professional characteristics that generally are associated with being a successful SAM. Among them, of course, are industry and service knowledgeability, team leadership, collaboration and the ability to clearly articulate recommendations. At the same time, customers and coworkers alike look for the trustworthiness engendered by an ethical SAM.

Other brand components associated with successful SAMs may include:

- Disciplined execution—gets things done on time and on budget
- Strategic adviser—helps make customers and partners successful
- Reads people well—has good intuition and insight into behavior
- Team player—creates energy and enthusiasm with whomever he works
- Responsiveness—promptly follows through on commitments
- Problem-solving ability—good analytical skills
- Confidence and confidentiality—sure of his skills and committed to the customer and team members

The next step is to formulate those professional and personal attributes into a brand promise associated with you. Think of it this way: Characteristics are facts—things that define you as a person. They don't, however, necessarily define the experience people have with you. You may be a talented musician, for instance, but when you meet with your customers they aren't thinking about your ability to play "Claire de Lune." No, they're thinking about what you can do for them. They're focused on what business-related results they can expect from you.

Your job is to work with your brand attributes to develop a brand promise, which essentially is the results you guarantee your stakeholders. That promise most likely should be focused directly on your customer or colleague and could be

as simple as: *William knows how to focus on the things that will have an impact. He commits to them and then executes.*

At the top of the personal brand pyramid is your psychological brand tagline, which is a one-line distillation that quickly and effectively conveys who you are and what you stand for. Ideally, if you put it on a flashcard and showed it to your customers and colleagues, they would think of you as instantaneously as they associate Miller High Life with "the champagne of beers." It could be as trenchant as: *Whatever it takes to get the job done.*

Ultimately, a brand is the total experience a customer has whenever she interacts with a company.

Show and tell

Another way to get to the same place is to formulate a story about yourself from which you can condense the personal and professional attributes you would like people to associate with you. In determining the story line, ask yourself these questions:


- What is the story about? In other words, what's the overall theme?
- What's the time frame of the tale? Is it a long story (long-term commitment) or a short one (quick results)?
- What are the key events driving the plot, and who are the main characters?
- What are some of the most important details? Are there several takeaways or one defining moment?
- And why is the story significant to your audience? What's the punch line or unique twist?

Your track record as a successful SAM can be equated to a book full of such stories, and from its chapters you should be able to discern specific keys to success, several salient lessons that were learned and some critical sales, technical or business skills that led to a happy ending for your customers and colleagues.

Conclusion

Congratulations. Now you've got your own personal brand. But your job's not done yet. Now you have to determine your stakeholders, separate them into primary and secondary groups and settle on a communications plan that delivers your personal brand message.

Focusing only on primary stakeholders, by the way, isn't enough. Successful SAMs are adept at maintaining a network of access relationships across multiple parts and levels of customer organizations to supply a continuous stream of insights about markets, competitors and customers' business strategies. Secondary stakeholders, it turns out, are the grapevine that feeds your primary customers and colleagues. Secondary stakeholders are significant influencers, and astute SAMs need to be sensitive to them.

Finally, personal brands need to be managed according to: stakeholder; specific interactions or touchpoints (are they routine or high value?); defined activities aligned with those touchpoints; and time frame (i.e., you may need to deliver your brand message daily with one stakeholder and quarterly with another). It takes time and effort, but the rewards can be significant. In the end it comes down to a simple choice in the way customers and colleagues vocalize their thoughts about your value as a SAM. Will it be a few bars from "Who Are You" or a song of praise? 

¹ Chris Warren, "You're branded (like it or not)," *American Way*, Aug. 1, 2004, www.americanwaymag.com.

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Additional reading

For more information on this subject in SAMA's library, the editors recommend: Catherine Blake, "Stories of character: a former SAM's perspective," *Focus: Teams*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 2006, www.strategicaccounts.org; and Niles Hysell, "Measuring brand strength with customers," *Velocity*®, Vol. 4, No. 4, Fall 2002, www.strategicaccounts.org.