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The Brand Called You

The original article by the man who began searching for excellence and ended up being America's preeminent management guru, appeared in FastCompany back in 1997. It hasn't aged one bit!

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It's this simple: You are a brand. You are in charge of your brand. There is no single path to success. And there is no one right way to create the brand called You. Except this: Start today. Or else.

It's a new brand world.

That cross-trainer you're wearing— one look at the distinctive swoosh on the side tells everyone who's got you branded. That coffee travel mug you're carrying— ah, you're a Starbucks woman! Your T-shirt with the distinctive Champion "C" on the sleeve, the blue jeans with the prominent Levi's rivets, the watch with the hey-this-certifies-I-made-it icon on the face, your fountain pen with the maker's symbol crafted into the end ...

You're branded, branded, branded, branded.

It's time for me— and you— to take a lesson from the big brands, a lesson that's true for anyone who's interested in what it takes to stand out and prosper in the new world of work.

Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding. We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc.

> **To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You.**

It's that simple— and that hard. And that's inescapable.

Behemoth companies may take turns buying each other or acquiring every hot startup that catches their eye— mergers in 1996 set records. Hollywood may be interested in only blockbusters and book publishers may want to put out only guaranteed best-sellers. But don't be fooled by all the frenzy at the humongous end of the size spectrum.

The real action is at the other end: the main chance is becoming a free agent in an economy of free agents, looking to have the best season you can imagine in your field, looking to do your best work and chalk up a remarkable track record, and looking to establish your own micro equivalent of the Nike swoosh. Because if you do, you'll not only reach out toward every opportunity within arm's (or laptop's) length, you'll not only make a noteworthy contribution to your team's success— you'll also put yourself in a great bargaining position for next season's free-agency market.

The good news— and it is largely good news— is that everyone has a chance to stand out. Everyone has a chance to learn, improve, and build up their skills. Everyone has a chance to be a brand worthy of remark.

Who understands this fundamental principle? The big companies do. They've come a long way in a short time: it was just over four years ago, April 2, 1993 to be precise, when Philip Morris cut the price of Marlboro cigarettes by 40 cents a pack. That was on a Friday. On Monday, the stock market value of packaged goods companies fell by $25 billion. Everybody agreed: brands were doomed.

Today brands are everything, and all kinds of products and services— from accounting firms to sneaker makers to restaurants— are figuring out how to transcend the narrow boundaries of their categories and become a brand surrounded by a Tommy Hilfiger-like buzz.

Who else understands it? Every single Web site sponsor. In fact, the Web makes the case for branding more directly than any packaged good or consumer product ever could. Here's what the Web says: Anyone can have a Web site. And today, because anyone can ... anyone does! So how do you know which sites are worth visiting, which sites to bookmark, which sites are worth going to more than once? The answer: branding.

> **The sites you go back to are the sites you trust. They're the sites where the brand name tells you that the visit will be worth your time— again and again. The brand is a promise of the value you'll receive.**

The same holds true for that other killer app of the Net— email. When everybody has email and anybody can send you email, how do you decide whose messages you're going to read and respond to first— and whose you're going to send to the trash unread? The answer: personal branding.

> **The name of the email sender is every bit as important a brand— is a brand— as the name of the Web site you visit. It's a promise of the value you'll receive for the time you spend reading the message.**

Nobody understands branding better than professional services firms. Look at McKinsey or Arthur Andersen for a model of the new rules of branding at the company and personal level. Almost every professional services firm works with the same business model. They have almost no hard assets— my guess is that most probably go so far as to rent or lease every tangible item they possibly can to keep from having to own anything. They have lots of soft assets— more conventionally known as people, preferably smart, motivated, talented people. And they have huge revenues— and astounding profits.

They also have a very clear culture of work and life. You're hired, you report to work, you join a team— and you immediately start figuring out how to deliver value to the customer. Along the way, you learn stuff, develop your skills, hone your abilities, and move from project to project. And if you're really smart, you figure out how to distinguish yourself from all the other very smart people walking around with $1,500 suits, high-powered laptops, and well-polished resumes. Along the way, if you're really smart, you figure out what it takes to create a distinctive role for yourself— you create a message and a strategy to promote the brand called You.

What makes you different?

Start right now: as of this moment you're going to think of yourself differently! You're not an "employee" of General Motors, you're not a "staffer" at General Mills, you're not a "worker" at General Electric or a "human resource" at General Dynamics (ooops, it's gone!). Forget the Generals! You don't "belong to" any company for life, and your chief affiliation isn't to any particular "function." You're not defined by your job title and you're not confined by your job description.

Starting today You are a brand.

You're every bit as much a brand as Nike, Coke, Pepsi, or the Body Shop. To start thinking like your own favorite brand manager, ask yourself the same question the brand managers at Nike, Coke, Pepsi, or the Body Shop ask themselves: What is it that my product or service does that makes it different? Give yourself the traditional 15-words-or-less contest challenge. Take the time to write down your answer. And then take the time to read it. Several times.

If your answer wouldn't light up the eyes of a prospective client or command a vote of confidence from a satisfied past client, or— worst of all— if it doesn't grab you, then you've got a big problem. It's time to give some serious thought and even more serious effort to imagining and developing yourself as a brand.

Start by identifying the qualities or characteristics that make you distinctive from your competitors— or your colleagues.

What have you done lately— this week— to make yourself stand out? What would your colleagues or your customers say is your greatest and clearest strength? Your most noteworthy (as in, worthy of note) personal trait?

Go back to the comparison between brand You and brand X— the approach the corporate biggies take to creating a brand. The standard model they use is feature-benefit: every feature they offer in their product or service yields an identifiable and distinguishable benefit for their customer or client. A dominant feature of Nordstrom department stores is the personalized service it lavishes on each and every customer. The customer benefit: a feeling of being accorded individualized attention— along with all of the choice of a large department store.

So, what is the "feature-benefit model" that the brand called You offers?

Do you deliver your work on time, every time? Your internal or external customer gets dependable, reliable service that meets its strategic needs. Do you anticipate and solve problems before they become crises? Your client saves money and headaches just by having you on the team. Do you always complete your projects within the allotted budget? I can't name a single client of a professional services firm who doesn't go ballistic at cost overruns.

Your next step is to cast aside all the usual descriptors that employees and workers depend on to locate themselves in the company structure. Forget your job title. Ask yourself: What do I do that adds remarkable, measurable, distinguished, distinctive value? Forget your job description. Ask yourself: What do I do that I am most proud of? Most of all, forget about the standard rungs of progression you've climbed in your career up to now. Burn that damnable "ladder" and ask yourself: What have I accomplished that I can unabashedly brag about?

When **Tom Peters** and Bob Waterman produced In Search of Excellence over 25 years ago, they effectively introduced the world of business to the notion of Excellence per se, a state of mind and daily practice not normally associated with enterprise, and an inspiring and profitable aspiration at a time when America's competitiveness was under full-blown assault. In short, then and now, the unwavering pursuit of Excellence, from the finance department to after-sales service, in the car dealership and police department as well as the bank branch and aircraft factory, provides the basis for an unmatchable competitive advantage—and acts on one and all as an ongoing spur to pathbreaking achievement. And in our global village, getting flatter by the day as it is, Excellence is a universal idea-ideal (think Olympics) that translates and transports across all borders.

You can learn more about Tom here: Tom Peters!