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“Facing Your Most Important Branding Challenge: Your Personal Brand”

Presented by Dan Bellack, CBC

About two weeks ago, I sent out an email to the mailing list of my website letting the subscribers know that the creator of the *Ad Bull* would be holding forth here today.

I got the following response from Regis McKenna: “Don't mean to rain on your parade but the 23rd is the day John Kerry is in Silicon Valley and (some) major events have been planned for months. Now I didn't realize that you are actually an agent for the Bush Administration. Given all the observations concerning the ‘rebranding’ of candidates, perhaps there is a way to have Kerry stop by for a few pointers.” I responded that I didn't feel that Regis needed any lessons in personal branding. As for John Kerry, he might want to attend. Truth be told, I'm a little bit concerned about offering aid and comfort to either of the candidates. I tend to agree with Will Rogers when he said, “I never vote for politicians, it only encourages them.”

Since this is a BMA audience, I can't help but mention one of my favorite stories about traveling around the country giving speeches to over thirty BMA chapters during my year as chairman. It was November of 1986 and I was speaking to the New York chapter. I was struggling with a new pair of bifocals and in an attempt to get my text in focus, I shoved the lectern forward . . . and knocked a very large decorative fern down off the podium to floor some three or four feet below. The result was a resounding crash and a very hushed audience. It was at that moment that the muse that sometimes blesses speakers with the right line at the right time caused me to say . . . “Well, I have heard of having a plant in the audience, but this is ridiculous!”

While there are no plants in this audience, just a lot of old friends from BMA and TFB days, I find this experience a bit daunting. Many of you have seen me at my best and at my worst. I can only hope that my personal brand is in tact after all these years of knowing one another and that it will be unsullied when I have completed my talk.

Let's Get Started

The great secrets in life are surprising simple. From *All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten* by Robert Fulghum to *How To Win Friends And Influence People* by Dale Carnegie to *The Holy Bible*, the words and ideas we have needed to live a good life and support a good personal brand have been within our reach. The question that comes to my mind is “why don't more of us do something about it?”

In the next thirty minutes or so, don't expect any epiphanies, searing revelations or big “aha!” moments. You have been exposed to most of the big ideas that I am going to speak about. All I can hope to do is help you hear them in a different and more personal way. No fancy slides or pyrotechnics, just some important ideas. So feel free to take a note or two but be assured that a copy of this talk will be available both at “www.adbull.com” and the BMA website. And save your questions. We should have a few minutes at the close of my talk for you to share any comments you might have.

Perhaps the single most important branding challenge that faces each of you is the articulation and management of our own personal brand. Your personal brand has a serious impact on your life. Just as a product with tainted brand image cannot command top dollar—or in some cases, can't be sold at all—a personal brand can cost you a promotion or prevent you from getting the peer cooperation you need to be successful at work. A strong personal brand can mean promotions, new job opportunities and more satisfying interpersonal business relationships. And, of course, it has a strong impact on your family life.

The good news is that you have control over the many of the things that can lead to a strong personal brand. The bad news is you don't have anyone but yourself to blame if you mishandle the task. You *are* the manager of your personal brand.

What it boils down to is this: jobs and fancy titles come and go but your brand is always there. So let's talk about some simple truths about personal brands and how they happen.

The Personal Branding Hypefest

To prepare for this talk today, I did some research on the Internet to refresh my sense of how much is being said and done in the area of personal branding. I can tell you that it has become a cottage industry. Dozens of books and consultancies out there promise to show you the way to personal branding nirvana, complete with public adoration and phenomenal wealth. Titles shout at you "Brand Yourself!" "The Personal Branding Phenomenon," "Me Incorporated: Your Own Magnetic Brand," and from a life-long New Yorker, "Hey, Yo, Over Here . . . Brand This!" (Okay, I made up the last one.)

I want to point out that my survey of what is promoted "out there" did reveal that much of it is overly complicated and/or gussied up with a lot of extraneous stuff designed to differentiate the originator's offerings from the rest of the hungry pack.

My friend Regis McKenna weighed in with an interesting contrarian viewpoint that could lead one to conclude that my talk today isn't needed at all. As he is generally regarded as one of Silicon Valley's branding gurus and a noted author his comment is worth hearing:

"Dan, I have no idea what 'personal branding' means. If it means just being 'who you are,' I never felt it required a campaign. What was so interesting about such people as Gordon Moore, Bob Noyce, Joe Montana, Steve Young, Jay Chiat, Steve Jobs, Andy Grove, even Larry Ellison, Dave Packard, Bill Hewlett, Art Rock and many others I had the good fortune to know—for better or worse—'what you saw was what you got.' Hey, I think you fit that bill too!"

While I am interested in—and, in the case of the last line, flattered by—his comments, I think personal branding does require "a campaign." Although "campaign" is not the first word I would choose, I do think that achieving a good personal brand does require some systematic thought, planning and action directed toward a specific result.

Your Personal Brand Journey

To begin with, I think the simplest way to think about branding is to define it simply—two words: “promises kept.” The promises I’m talking about are the ones that we make every day to important groups of people in our lives (family, friends, business colleagues . . . and ourselves).

These promises are a reflection of what we say is important to us, in other words, our central values. For example, if you say that telling the truth is important to you, then lying becomes a failure to keep a personal brand promise. The sum total of the promises you keep and the ones you don’t keep becomes the scoreboard for your personal brand.

How To Begin Supporting Your Brand

Start with the fundamentals:

- (1) Define the audiences that are important to you. Ask yourself which people or groups of people do you make promises to? Do they represent all the important groups in your life—both business and personal?
- (2) Think about what kind of promises you’ve made to the people in those groups.
- (3) Ask yourself if the promises you have made are a good match with your central values—those things that are most important to you regarding how you want to live your life.
- (4) Conduct a little personal brand research to determine whether or not the important audiences in your life think that you are keeping your brand promises.

For example, you might ask a friend who is trustworthy—and will be perceived by your audience as being trustworthy—to do an email survey that asks the some questions that I will suggest toward the end of my remarks.

Prepare a list of people from all of the important groups in your life. Have your friend return the feedback to you without telling you which person said what.

If you don't trust the person you are querying to tell you the truth, you shouldn't be asking their opinion.

Then get ready for the one of the hardest parts of this process: listen to what the feedback is telling you. Even when this process is completed, continue to listen for feedback on your central values and how well you are keeping your promises.

Let me offer what I feel is a great example of a "personal branding listening" opportunity. You can probably tell just by looking at me that I am a huge Black Sabbath fan. Recently, Ozzy Osbourne revealed that he feels guilty about his wild-child, Kelly. He feels that he may have aided her spiral into drugs and alcohol. I hope that ol' Oz has tumbled to the fact that his personal brand as a profane dooper might have had just a teeny bit to do with the imprinting on his kids. "Do as a say, not as I do" just doesn't cut it when you're raising children.

- (5) If you are visually oriented, you may want to consider gathering the feedback on a visual map of your personal brand. Among a number of samples of brand maps, check out page 75 of *TechnoBrands* by Chuck Pettis. This process can help you understand the relationship between your central values and the concepts you choose to articulate your personal brand.
- (6) Compare your perceived personal brand to your central values.
- (7) If you find there is agreement between how you are perceived and the person you would like to be . . . great! Keep on doing what you are doing and you will reinforce your personal brand.
- (8) However, if there are areas of disagreement you have to change your behavior so that it reinforces your personal values. If you are successful, you will re-brand yourself over time.

My friend John Green, a marketing guy out of FedEx and Consolidated Freightways, offered me some valuable feedback on my earlier writing about personal branding, “Dan, your structure in the sections above maps perfectly to the ‘brand building structure’ that I was taught and have effectively applied in the business world: 1) identify the key attributes, 2) translate those attributes into customer benefits, and 3) develop a history of real-life evidence that your brand lives up to its promise.”

A Few Comments On My Own Personal Branding Journey

At this point, I hope you’ll forgive me if I use myself as an example. I will quickly say that I do not see myself as a perfect example of “owning and living a good personal brand.” Like most of you—except for a couple cohorts from TFB days who convinced me that they were perfect—I have *not* always lived up to every single brand promise that I made over the years. And I wish that I could look you all in the eye and tell you that I have been consciously thinking about and developing my personal brand for decades. I *haven’t*. Given that caveat, let me offer some insight into my own personal brand journey. It is the one that I know best.

For me, the process began when I set up my part-time consulting practice after leaving the agency business in 1992. At that point I gave quite a bit of thought to how I wanted to live my life in the coming years and what groups of people were important to me.

To begin with, I decided to work part-time, in spite of the fact that 52 is a little bit young to stop working full time. Why did I do it? Those of you who think that you know me might suggest it was a simply a matter of energy and attitude. I would suggest two other reasons. First, I thought that it was time that I started investing more in for my family. Like many of you I didn’t spend as much time as I could have with my wife, Judy, and my daughters, Hailey and Mallory. Second, the timing in the sale of the agency proved to be fortuitous. In other words I was lucky enough to be able to do it.

Obviously, I also thought about how I wanted to relate to—and be seen by—the business community. It led to my choosing the positioning line “A Friend In The Advertising Business.” I thought it summed up my values pretty well. For example, my dictionary said that a friend is, “a person attached to another by a feeling of affection or personal regard.” To me that implied that:

- A friend does what is best for you
- A friend tells you the truth
- A friend is someone you can trust

How Have I Been Perceived?

In the years since I formally articulated some of my central values on that first Bellack Consulting business card I have continued to think about my own personal brand. While I have not conducted formal research, I have received some fairly strong feedback from my key audiences—not always the most positive messages.

For example, I remember an email that I was mistakenly copied on from a disgruntled agency chief who’s firm I had *not* included in an agency selection process I was running for their client. (I felt that the account had really outgrown their small shop.)

In an email to the president I said that I was passing their name along to a couple of companies that I thought could use their help. In an attempt to forward my message to his partner he mistakenly “forwarded to all.” The problem was he had prefaced his forward with the following, “Well, Mr. Asshole thinks he is being a real big help.” At first I gritted my teeth and started to file it under “no good deed goes unpunished” and go on. Then I stopped to think about whether or not my actions were true to my personal brand. I concluded that I had been a friend to agency principal whether he knew it or not. And, yes, I did call him and in a very congenial way told him of his mistake. (And, yes, I *did* enjoy the moment of shock and embarrassed silence at the end of the line when I told him.) And, yes, I passed along the name of his shop after that even after his unfortunate gaff and copied him on those emails.

In my personal life, Hailey and Mallory have been kind enough to tell me that I was a pretty good Dad when they were growing up. Still there were still a lot of late nights and business trips that got in the way of me being the father and husband that I could have been.

Maybe I learned my lesson. I am now blessed with four grandchildren who have seen me (and Judy) for every significant holiday and school event. Judy and I have created a tradition of special out-of-town trips with any two of four with grandma and grandpa. And no week goes by without seeing our daughters and grandkids four or five times. And although I might grumble occasionally, that is more than fine with me. I will quickly add that in terms of this part of my life, Judy has been a major factor in helping me create and keep my personal brand promises. She is an incredible mother and grandmother and a real role model for me.

On the both the personal and business sides of my life, I have stumbled a few times in keeping my promises. On the other hand, since I starting consulting with high-tech companies on their agency relationships in 1993, I have had a surprising number of unsolicited comments about my acting as a friend to agencies and clients during the agency reviews that I conducted and my other projects.

Bob Gardner of Gardner Geary Coll wrote, "Dan, I've always admired how you endeavor at all times to really do the right thing, regardless of who is paying you. That is a stellar and completely under-appreciated character trait in today's world."

Mike Massaro former COO of Goldberg Moser O' Neil said, "You are one of the few (maybe the only) advertising people I ever met that wasn't infused with a sense of cynicism."

Finally, Dave Carlick summed it up for me when he said, "Dan Bellack's consultancy slogan (*A Friend In The Advertising Business*) ranks among the world's greatest understatements."

Wow . . . as we pause for a moment to let my head return to normal size, let me remind you that like most of you, my personal brand is far from perfect. It is a work in progress and probably will be for the rest of my life. Don't be disappointed if you slip once in a while. The important thing is to recognize what you can do differently in the future—and then do it.

Winding Up

I mentioned earlier that I would offer some questions to help you start your personal brand research. Here are a few:

- *Have you kept your promises?* Do you do what you say you are going to do?
- *Are you trusted?* Ask *clients* what agencies need to do to be of value. Ask *agencies* what makes a great client. One word keeps coming up: *Trust*. You might want to ask yourself “do you act in a way that inspires trust in others?”
- *Are you being the kind of person you would really like to work with?* Let me give you an example. My friend Fred Goldberg helped build one of the finest advertising agencies on the West Coast. I think one of the biggest reasons for their success was Fred and his central values. I would like to read you an email he sent out to his people:

“To: Everyone”

“From: Fred”

“Subject: Perception/Reality”

“I notice with increasing displeasure the frequency of folks who write memos and letters around the agency, and send these memos out with ‘the most important people’ listed first on the copy list. I know because I’m usually listed first.”

“There’s been a tradition at this agency that seems to have gotten a bit lost.”

“We do things alphabetically, not by rank or title or tenure or department.”

“ We expect that everyone will contribute equally and regularly. That everyone can offer an intelligent, well thought-out point of view on just about anything that’s going on. That everyone can help keep, and raise the standards and quality levels at the agency in all respects. And we expect therefore that everyone should be considered equal as well.”

“I don’t consider myself ‘the most important people’ around here. In fact contributions made by others generally outweigh mine as does their importance and vote on most issues.”

“So this will hopefully provide you with a reality check on whatever you thought before reading this note. And in the future your correspondence will reflect this thinking.”

“It would serve you well if you thought about it in terms of (your) behavior as well.”

That’s the kind of man and agency I would want to work for. (And to all you TFB people, you knew that Bob, Del and I were only kidding about that Holy Trinity stuff. Didn’t you?)

- *Do you believe in common courtesy, i.e. returning phone calls and emails?)* How often do you leave messages unanswered?
- *Do you take the time to help others with requests for information, even if it doesn’t mean money in your pocket?*
- *Do you take pride in yourself?* The way you dress, the quality of your personal promotional materials and even typo-free emails, reflect your "brand values".
- *Do you take pride in your surroundings?* Do you contribute to your personal brand by keeping your office or cubicle looking professional?

And here are a half dozen things that I think you can do have a good personal brand:

- *Be sincere.* Do not fall into the trap described by that famous philosopher, Adolph Marx (that’s “Groucho” to you) when he said that the secret of success in show business is honesty and sincerity. “Once you learn how to fake that, you’ve got it made.” Well, folks, our world is *not* show biz.

- *Be "trust worthy"*. The fastest way to get the respect of other people is to be deserving of it.
- *Don't lie, cheat or steal*. My daughter Hailey and her teacher and editor friends see constant "borrowing from material on the Internet without attribution."
- *Respect one another*. Agency people, respect the clients as well as your agency cohorts. And clients, treat the agency with the same kind of respect you'd like to have in return.
- *Be concerned about the quality of your communications with others*. That includes everything from being on time for meetings to taking time to use correct grammar and spelling in e-mails.
- *Don't make promises you don't intend to keep*. Think twice about taking personal responsibility for getting things done. (It's easy to say, "I just got busy." But, it's not right.)
- *Make humanity a part of your business*. Make people inside and outside your business as important as your work. Do stuff for others . . . for nothing. Just because it feels good.

For example, I got the following email from my friend Mark Fulton concerning a five-year passion for helping kids:

"Amanda is one of the six first-graders that I've been tutoring one-on-one in reading every Tuesday and Thursday at Fair Meadow school in Palo Alto. We've been reading together since September of last year. She's been testing below grade level. She has made a little progress, but not much. Today was our last session. School gets out next week. Amanda is a great sounder out. But she sounds out words that she already knows. Suddenly on Tuesday, she began to read. No sounding out. Just reading. One word after another. One sentence after another. One page after another. Just like that. She did it again today. Lisa, her teacher is going to test her again tomorrow. I'm sure Amanda will score at grade level or better. Damn, I'm good. Okay, maybe I just feel good."

What a wonderful example of doing stuff for others.

End Note

I'll start to wrap this up with a story in form of an important lesson that I learned from a very unlikely fellow, in a very unlikely place.

When I was fresh out of college I got my first job as assistant personal manager and timekeeper at Allen Industries in Compton, California. The manufactured automotive rugs and seat cushions.

Finus Luker, a wonderful storyteller, a first-rate country and western guitar player and a line foreman at Allen had befriended me. One day when we were standing near the long conveyer belts that carried cotton fibers into the large machine that began the conversion process from fibers to pieces of padding, he mentioned the high number of maintenance guys and line personnel that had mangled or missing fingers.

Finus explained that the chains that drove the belts had to be kept clear of clumps of cotton that could clog the large gear wheels at the end of the line. He said it was easy for a guy to get so focused on picking cotton out of the chain that he would get a finger caught in the gears at the end of the line. Instant amputation.

He summarized it all by saying, "If you're going to pick cotton out of a slow-moving chain, be aware that they chain does not go on forever."

That's the story he told. What I heard was a wonderful metaphor. Our lives don't go on forever. To know that the end is out there somewhere gives our lives perspective and meaning. But be aware that we do only have one life to live. Standing here today, I admit to you that it is the single most difficult lesson that I have ever had to learn.

As Robert Fulghrum taught us, "Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seeds you planted in the Styrofoam cup—they all die. So do we."

And at the risk of overstaying my welcome . . . one more story. My then four-year-old-grandson, Aidan, and I were walking down the street last year. He looked up at me and said, "Grandpa?"

I said, "Yes, Aidan."

“You know, we’re all gonna die sometime.”

I allowed as how I knew that we would. Perhaps a little better than he did.

“Grandpa? You know when you die. . . you can’t take your stuff with ya.”

(Oh boy, is that ever true.)

Then looking down at the hand he was holding, he said, “Grandpa? Are you going to give me your ring?”

“Yes, Aidan . . . I certainly am.”

Don’t wait to take personal branding to heart. Start your own personal brand journey today. And Fulghum suggested, “When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.”

Have a wonderful “rest of your life” and take care of your personal brand. Live your life so that you can say in the words of the famous Samuel Goldwyn malapropism, “If I could drop dead right now, I’d be the happiest man alive!