

The Brand Called You

Big companies understand the importance of brands. Today, in the Age of the Individual, you have to be your own brand. Here's what it takes to be the CEO of Me Inc.

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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 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, 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 (oops, 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? If you're going to be a brand, you've got to become relentlessly focused on what you do that adds value, that you're proud of, and most important, that you can shamelessly take credit for.

When you've done that, sit down and ask yourself one more question to define your brand: What do I want to be famous for? That's right -- famous for!

What's the pitch for You?

So it's a cliché: don't sell the steak, sell the sizzle. it's also a principle that every corporate brand understands implicitly, from Omaha Steaks's through-the-mail sales program to Wendy's "we're just regular folks" ad campaign. No matter how beefy your set of skills, no matter how tasty you've made that feature-benefit proposition, you still have to market the bejesus out of your brand -- to customers, colleagues, and your virtual network of associates.

For most branding campaigns, the first step is visibility. If you're General Motors, Ford, or Chrysler, that usually means a full flight of TV and print ads designed to get billions of "impressions" of your brand in front of the consuming public. If you're brand You, you've got the same need for visibility -- but no budget to buy it.

So how do you market brand You?

There's literally no limit to the ways you can go about enhancing your profile. Try moonlighting! Sign up for an extra project inside your organization, just to introduce yourself to new colleagues and showcase your skills -- or work on new ones. Or, if you can carve out the time, take on a freelance project that gets you in touch with a totally novel group of people. If you can get them singing your praises, they'll help spread the word about what a remarkable contributor you are.

If those ideas don't appeal, try teaching a class at a community college, in an adult education program, or in your own company. You get credit for being an expert, you increase your standing as a professional, and you increase the likelihood that people will come back to you with more requests and more opportunities to stand out from the crowd.

If you're a better writer than you are a teacher, try contributing a column or an opinion piece to your local newspaper. And when I say local, I mean local. You don't have to make the op-ed page of the New York Times to make the grade. Community newspapers, professional newsletters, even inhouse company publications have white space they need to fill. Once you get started, you've got a track record -- and clips that you can use to snatch more chances.

And if you're a better talker than you are teacher or writer, try to get yourself on a panel discussion at a conference or sign up to make a presentation at a workshop. Visibility has a funny way of multiplying; the

hardest part is getting started. But a couple of good panel presentations can earn you a chance to give a "little" solo speech -- and from there it's just a few jumps to a major address at your industry's annual convention.

The second important thing to remember about your personal visibility campaign is: it all matters. When you're promoting brand You, everything you do -- and everything you choose not to do -- communicates the value and character of the brand. Everything from the way you handle phone conversations to the email messages you send to the way you conduct business in a meeting is part of the larger message you're sending about your brand.

Partly it's a matter of substance: what you have to say and how well you get it said. But it's also a matter of style. On the Net, do your communications demonstrate a command of the technology? In meetings, do you keep your contributions short and to the point? It even gets down to the level of your brand You business card: Have you designed a cool-looking logo for your own card? Are you demonstrating an appreciation for design that shows you understand that packaging counts -- a lot -- in a crowded world?

The key to any personal branding campaign is "word-of-mouth marketing." Your network of friends, colleagues, clients, and customers is the most important marketing vehicle you've got; what they say about you and your contributions is what the market will ultimately gauge as the value of your brand. So the big trick to building your brand is to find ways to nurture your network of colleagues -- consciously.

What's the real power of You?

If you want to grow your brand, you've got to come to terms with power -- your own. The key lesson: power is not a dirty word!

In fact, power for the most part is a badly misunderstood term and a badly misused capability. I'm talking about a different kind of power than we usually refer to. It's not ladder power, as in who's best at climbing over the adjacent bods. It's not who's-got-the-biggest-office-by-six-square-inches power or who's-got-the-fanciest-title power.

It's influence power.

It's being known for making the most significant contribution in your particular area. It's reputational power. If you were a scholar, you'd measure it by the number of times your publications get cited by other people. If you were a consultant, you'd measure it by the number of CEOs who've got your business card in their Rolodexes. (And better yet, the number who know your beeper number by heart.)

Getting and using power -- intelligently, responsibly, and yes, powerfully -- are essential skills for growing your brand. One of the things that attracts us to certain brands is the power they project. As a consumer, you want to associate with brands whose powerful presence creates a halo effect that rubs off on you.

It's the same in the workplace. There are power trips that are worth taking -- and that you can take without appearing to be a self-absorbed, self-aggrandizing megalomaniacal jerk. You can do it in small, slow, and subtle ways. Is your team having a hard time organizing productive meetings? Volunteer to write the agenda for the next meeting. You're contributing to the team, and you get to decide what's on and off the agenda. When it's time to write a post-project report, does everyone on your team head for the door? Beg for the chance to write the report -- because the hand that holds the pen (or taps the keyboard) gets to write or at least shape the organization's history.

Most important, remember that power is largely a matter of perception. If you want people to see you as a powerful brand, act like a credible leader. When you're thinking like brand You, you don't need org-chart authority to be a leader. The fact is you are a leader. You're leading You!

One key to growing your power is to recognize the simple fact that we now live in a project world. Almost all work today is organized into bite-sized packets called projects. A project-based world is ideal for

growing your brand: projects exist around deliverables, they create measurables, and they leave you with braggables. If you're not spending at least 70% of your time working on projects, creating projects, or organizing your (apparently mundane) tasks into projects, you are sadly living in the past. Today you have to think, breathe, act, and work in projects.

Project World makes it easier for you to assess -- and advertise -- the strength of brand You. Once again, think like the giants do. Imagine yourself a brand manager at Procter & Gamble: When you look at your brand's assets, what can you add to boost your power and felt presence? Would you be better off with a simple line extension -- taking on a project that adds incrementally to your existing base of skills and accomplishments? Or would you be better off with a whole new product line? Is it time to move overseas for a couple of years, venturing outside your comfort zone (even taking a lateral move -- damn the ladders), tackling something new and completely different?

Whatever you decide, you should look at your brand's power as an exercise in new-look résumé; management -- an exercise that you start by doing away once and for all with the word "résumé." You don't have an old-fashioned résumé anymore! You've got a marketing brochure for brand You. Instead of a static list of titles held and positions occupied, your marketing brochure brings to life the skills you've mastered, the projects you've delivered, the braggables you can take credit for. And like any good marketing brochure, yours needs constant updating to reflect the growth -- breadth and depth -- of brand You.

What's loyalty to You?

Everyone is saying that loyalty is gone; loyalty is dead; loyalty is over. I think that's a bunch of crap.

I think loyalty is much more important than it ever was in the past. A 40-year career with the same company once may have been called loyalty; from here it looks a lot like a work life with very few options, very few opportunities, and very little individual power. That's what we used to call indentured servitude.

Today loyalty is the only thing that matters. But it isn't blind loyalty to the company. It's loyalty to your colleagues, loyalty to your team, loyalty to your project, loyalty to your customers, and loyalty to yourself. I see it as a much deeper sense of loyalty than mindless loyalty to the Company Z logo.

I know this may sound like selfishness. But being CEO of Me Inc. requires you to act selfishly -- to grow yourself, to promote yourself, to get the market to reward yourself. Of course, the other side of the selfish coin is that any company you work for ought to applaud every single one of the efforts you make to develop yourself. After all, everything you do to grow Me Inc. is gravy for them: the projects you lead, the networks you develop, the customers you delight, the braggables you create generate credit for the firm. As long as you're learning, growing, building relationships, and delivering great results, it's good for you and it's great for the company.

That win-win logic holds for as long as you happen to be at that particular company. Which is precisely where the age of free agency comes into play. If you're treating your résumé as if it's a marketing brochure, you've learned the first lesson of free agency. The second lesson is one that today's professional athletes have all learned: you've got to check with the market on a regular basis to have a reliable read on your brand's value. You don't have to be looking for a job to go on a job interview. For that matter, you don't even have to go on an actual job interview to get useful, important feedback.

The real question is: How is brand You doing? Put together your own "user's group" -- the personal brand You equivalent of a software review group. Ask for -- insist on -- honest, helpful feedback on your performance, your growth, your value. It's the only way to know what you would be worth on the open market. It's the only way to make sure that, when you declare your free agency, you'll be in a strong bargaining position. It's not disloyalty to "them"; it's responsible brand management for brand You -- which also generates credit for them.

What's the future of You?

It's over. No more vertical. No more ladder. That's not the way careers work anymore. Linearity is out. A career is now a checkerboard. Or even a maze. It's full of moves that go sideways, forward, slide on the diagonal, even go backward when that makes sense. (It often does.) A career is a portfolio of projects that teach you new skills, gain you new expertise, develop new capabilities, grow your colleague set, and constantly reinvent you as a brand.

As you scope out the path your "career" will take, remember: the last thing you want to do is become a manager. Like "résumé," "manager" is an obsolete term. It's practically synonymous with "dead end job." What you want is a steady diet of more interesting, more challenging, more provocative projects. When you look at the progression of a career constructed out of projects, directionality is not only hard to track -- Which way is up? -- but it's also totally irrelevant.

Instead of making yourself a slave to the concept of a career ladder, reinvent yourself on a semiregular basis. Start by writing your own mission statement, to guide you as CEO of Me Inc. What turns you on? Learning something new? Gaining recognition for your skills as a technical wizard? Shepherding new ideas from concept to market? What's your personal definition of success? Money? Power? Fame? Or doing what you love? However you answer these questions, search relentlessly for job or project opportunities that fit your mission statement. And review that mission statement every six months to make sure you still believe what you wrote.

No matter what you're doing today, there are four things you've got to measure yourself against. First, you've got to be a great teammate and a supportive colleague. Second, you've got to be an exceptional expert at something that has real value. Third, you've got to be a broad-gauged visionary -- a leader, a teacher, a farsighted "imagineer." Fourth, you've got to be a businessperson -- you've got to be obsessed with pragmatic outcomes.

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.

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