

# BRAND RECOGNITION— WHAT DO PEOPLE SAY ABOUT YOU?

*by Suzanne Bates*

**Y**our leadership brand is the true reflection of you. It has to be authentic. You can discover your brand by understanding yourself, your story, and how you got to where you are today. But in the end, your brand identity comes down to a simple question: What do people say about you?

Let's talk about brand recognition, or what is often called *brand buzz*. How do you want the world that matters to your company to know you? And who is "the world" to you? I'm guessing it's colleagues and employees; people who might work for you someday; prospects and clients; business partners, other industry leaders, and investors or shareholders; regulators, policymakers, analysts, and the public. What do they say about you?

When you know your brand and you combine that with communicating your brand, you create *brand velocity*. The more powerful your brand, and the better you communicate it, the faster it builds. Velocity is important. Velocity increases the value and potency of your brand. It helps you build a wide circle of influence inside and outside your company.

Brand velocity will speed up progress on your important goals. For example, your leadership brand can attract top talent who want to work for a leader they admire. They have many choices as to where they work. They're at the top of their game. Your brand, well communicated, is noticed. People want to work for winners. You are able to attract top talent to your company and away from competitors.

If you're reluctant to embrace this concept of brand velocity, read on. You'll meet other leaders who once felt the same way. At first, they didn't know how powerful their

brands could be in building a great organization. They have since come to appreciate how important their brands are.

### Assessing Brand Velocity

Here's an exercise that will help you analyze your brand velocity, your core values taking hold, and creating an outcome.

1. Write down the values that you've learned through leadership experiences in your career.
2. Now, think about an important event in your company in the last three months. Perhaps it was a big win or a great response to a crisis, challenge, or obstacle. Do you see a connection to one of the above values? If yes, tell the story and connect it to the value.

### What If You Don't See It?

If you haven't yet seen brand velocity, the question to answer is why not? Think of a value you would like to see reflected in your organization. Consider the reasons you think people haven't yet fully adopted those values.

### Making It Happen

The question to ask is, Do I want this to happen by accident, or do I want it to happen consciously? Creating brand velocity should be a conscious activity. To do this, you must clearly define and then frequently communicate your values.

When you do, people begin to think and act in concert with those values. This becomes a good test for employee buy-in around your culture. If you see that people are not thinking and acting in concert with the brand values, they aren't a fit for the team. This helps you say good-bye to people who are not resonating with your culture. And, as your brand gains velocity, it attracts and retains those who do. The more velocity, the more positive buzz you create and the more in sync everyone is. Those become part of the fabric of your organization.

As you'll discover in the next story, while it can be a journey, you will get there. Just keep going. A leadership brand is built through work and hard-won lessons.

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### Being You, Living Your Brand

When famed fashion designer Tory Burch opened her first boutique store, many people in her own Manhattan socialite circles dismissed it as a vanity project. Burch was a socialite, on the short list of "who's who" people you'd want at a big event. She had studied art history at the University of Pennsylvania and spent the 1990s doing marketing and public relations for Ralph Lauren and Vera Wang by day, making the party scene by night.

But when she opened in Manhattan's Nolita district with a \$2 million investment courtesy of her then-husband (who remains an investor today), the fashion magazines and gossip rags raved. Burch was one of them. Friends from the New York social scene mobbed the store. It wasn't long before Oprah discovered Tory Burch, and the rest was history. By 2010 her company was projecting \$300 million in sales and was planning to open 100 stores worldwide.

But Tory Burch didn't try to be someone she wasn't. She capitalized on who she was. She knew fashion, she knew fashionistas, and that was the point. Her brand was her. It was authentic. Her design sense, combined with common sense, gave her brand tremendous velocity. She wore her own fashions and modeled the retro-cool, modern bohemian fashions that women now love. Burch was being herself, sharing her sense of style, which made her unique and authentic. She generates a ton of buzz in the media.

### Assess the Buzz About You

One way to assess the buzz is to read what is written and reported about you and your company. If you

have a large communications team or PR agency, they are probably tracking it. But even if you don't have a staff at your disposal, there are easy ways for you to do it yourself.

Try setting up Google Alerts for your organization or for your name. This will send you e-mail updates of the latest relevant Google results. Also, ask employees, colleagues, even clients to let you know if they come across anything. People often see things but never tell us because they assume we too have seen these media hits. But often we haven't and thus . . . we become the last people to hear about it. (If we ever do at all!)

### Communicating Your Core Brand

When Katherin Nukk-Freeman and her friend decided to open a law practice, they had already been lawyers in big firms. They knew they wanted to do it differently. Rather than grinding down new associates with 80- to 100-hour work weeks, they wanted to build a place where people could thrive, and where their clients saw them not as litigators but as a resource.

The tagline they wrote before they even opened the doors to Nukk-Freeman & Cerra, PC, was "teaming with employers to build a better workplace." What that meant to them wasn't just keeping their clients out of court; it was educating them about what to do.

While it is litigation that brings big paydays to law firms, Nukk-Freeman believed that their approach would win loyalty. They wanted long-term relationships with grateful clients who didn't have to go broke defending themselves in court.

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### How the Brand Built the Company—for Employees and Clients

Their approach is a differentiator in attracting top talent. Not only do they have a family-friendly environment and offer flexible work arrangements, they got creative and took a "team approach" to client work, which provided additional flexibility.

As they focused on educating clients, fewer clients went to court, generating loyalty; and even when they were sued, they tended to be on solid ground so defending them was easier, and the cases went their way—meaning the attorneys were regarded as highly successful. This of course meant clients voiced appreciation to their attorneys and staff for taking care of them and helping them to do the right thing. The attorneys felt successful financially but also felt good about the way they helped their clients.

The approach created longer-term relationships, as clients stayed with them. It meant they weren't constantly on the hunt for business—they didn't see the churn. It further burnished their brand identity, and made them feel good about the practice of law.

Nukk-Freeman, married with kids, and her partner, were able to meet their own family commitments, as were their employees. They attracted attorneys who would have been on a partner track at big-name firms: "At a large law firm it's a choice: you can be a good attorney or a good spouse or friend, or you can be a good parent and be a mediocre attorney in their eyes at those firms. We wanted to attract A-plus players who could be exceptional in both areas," she says.

### Leveraging Your Brand to Attract and Keep Talent

Your brand is a huge factor in attracting top talent. As the saying goes, people join companies, but they leave bosses. When people know what you stand for, and they see it living in the culture, it creates tremendous buzz.

When you communicate your brand, recruiting is far easier. People are knocking on your door. You don't have to rely solely on compensation and benefits.

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People want to work for winning leaders and brands. And you won't suffer the revolving door that challenges your competitors. The best people can work anywhere. This is where your brand and culture have value.

You know your brand is resonating when potential employees come in the door talking about you. You see it in their eyes. They are excited. While you have to consider skill, experience, and aptitude, that excitement is fantastic. All created by that attraction to your brand, and the culture that you foster.

### **Finding Things That Fit**

Lisa Matthews has been a successful investment manager for two decades. Her current firm, Winslow Evans & Crocker, is a full-service financial advisory firm with \$3 billion in assets under management.

She is an entrepreneur with a loyal following of individuals, families, businesses, and charitable foundations that make up her client roster. One reason for her success is her unique business model, to act as a "family office" for clients who aren't billionaires. The model came out of a philosophy that is one cornerstone of her brand, to help people make connections.

"I have a low threshold of tolerance for people who don't live by integrity," she says. "It's been my goal to have integrity since I started my business 21 years ago."

How is Matthews's brand communicated? I would be remiss if I didn't explain that she has a wide circle of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. She has built a powerful network. Although she moved to Boston mid-career, she joined boards, volunteered on committees, went to events, and took on leadership roles.

As a result, she has an enviable database of people who call her friend.

Matthews's brand is communicated in her everyday interactions in all these circles and organizations. "Your brand is built not just in business, but in consistently living the brand in all parts of your life," says Matthews. "My brand is who I am, no matter where I am, no matter what I'm doing, whoever I'm with, whoever is working for me, in my business."

Matthews is an energetic volunteer, but she also communicates her brand by being choosy about the organizations she serves. When she gets involved and discovers integrity isn't a value, she finds a way to gracefully bow out.

Matthews also openly shares her brand in her value statement, which she hands to every client and prospect. "Any time I take on a role or hire someone or work with a client, I have this discussion with them. We talk about my values and their values, and expectations and goals. There are times when I've walked away from strategic alliances, running other businesses, partnerships, or clients, and have fired clients because of a breach in the values or my brand."

People appreciate it when you communicate your brand values. They come to believe it as they interact with you. Your words are important; your actions confirm it. When your words and actions are consistent, it creates alchemy with your clients, prospects, colleagues, friends, employees, and others. Your brand value grows.

### **Assess the Fit with Your Brand**

If, like Lisa Matthews, you've been involved on boards and in organizations, you know that some have been a fit while others have not. You may have left those organizations because they were not aligned with your interests or your values. In fact, you may also have left a job for the same reason.

Be sure that all your associations directly and indirectly sync up with your brand. If they aren't in sync, it creates disharmony, for you and the organization, and it creates confusion about your brand.

Here's an exercise that will help you assess an association's fit with your brand:

1. Name a company, association, or nonprofit group.
2. What values or characteristics of this group initially attracted you?
3. Did your experience with the group affirm your initial impression and make you happy?
  - If yes, what was it about the group that aligned with your interests and values?
  - If no, what was happening that was out of alignment with your interests and values?
4. What did you learn from this experience that can help you choose organizations that are perfectly in sync with your leadership brand?

## An Evolving Brand

As vice president of public affairs at Dow Chemical, Matt Davis sat on the executive committee and reported directly to the CEO of Dow. In this role he had the opportunity to mentor dozens of other leaders, in addition to being a leader himself. Matt is passionate about how important it is to discover and build your personal brand. However, as his leadership role changed, he also had to reassess how he communicated his brand. "I'd been such a doer, regionally, and I had to reexamine how I saw myself," he said. "I had to be the motivator, inspiring people, and focus on getting the right person into the right job."

## Choosing to Lead, Not to Do

This is perhaps the greatest challenge many face in moving into leadership roles. You have probably been there yourself. You know how to do it. You've proven that. But you have to put doing aside, and learn to lead.

Davis successfully transitioned. Now, as a mentor to others, he advises them to step back and communicate. As energizing as it can be to get in there and get it done, when you're doing, you're not acting as a leader. Set the agenda, communicate the plan, align the organization, monitor results, hold people accountable, and inspire them to the highest level of performance.

## Choosing to Learn New Skills

Another choice that Matt Davis had to make was how to be tougher and more decisive. He has always been admired as an approachable, accessible person, with high energy and a strong presence. The feedback he received when he was promoted to the top job in the function was that he was "too nice." He knew it meant that he would have to make difficult decisions.

In Matt's case, choosing what kind of leader to be meant developing a skill he had not previously needed. He learned to be more hardline on decisions, to negotiate the disagreements and make the calls. In a Fortune 100 company, his is a demanding job, one that requires not only a strong work ethic but also the ability to make the call. He discovered he could still be himself—the high-energy, accessible, approachable person. He just needed to add a new dimension to his leadership brand.

Many times when we move into new roles, we wonder whether we will have to change. You are who you are. Your brand is your brand. You don't have to change, but you sometimes do have to adopt a new mind-set. Along with that you often need to develop new skills. You have a choice. You must decide, even late in your career, that you want to acquire a new skill. Those who do are more successful in becoming the leaders they need to be.

## Final Thoughts on What People Say

I wouldn't want the title of this article to be misconstrued. Building a brand isn't a popularity contest. As

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a leader you can't worry all the time about what people say. Some people aren't going to "get" you, like you, or want to be part of your organization. People will say good things and bad things. That's just the way it is. You have to be true to your core.

The leaders described in this article have built great brands by being authentic and following their own path. And being a leader certainly has its ups and downs. Leadership isn't a popularity contest, either. You don't have to be liked by everyone. You just need to be consistent and stay with your own true north.

The purpose of communicating your brand is to create a direction for your organization and to drive value into the company. Remember that above all, to build a powerful brand, you have to be true to yourself. Never compromise that.



*Suzanne Bates is author of the new book "Discover Your CEO Brand: Secrets to Embracing and Maximizing Your Unique Brand as a Leader" (McGraw-Hill). Founding CEO of Bates Communications, a firm that transforms leaders into powerful communicators who get results, Suzanne is also author of The Power Speaker Blog and two other books from McGraw-Hill: "Speak Like a CEO" and "Motivate Like a CEO." Visit Suzanne's website, [www.bates-communications.com](http://www.bates-communications.com), for more information.*