

## Branding Individuals

Remember a time when branding someone was a bad thing? When it implied intolerance, prejudice, and even harassment? Rarely a month goes by today when a client or potential client doesn't approach our agency about branding themselves. Most are not seeking personal publicity, which falls tidily under the discipline of public relations; most are assuming instead that branding themselves is a smart tactic to help grow their business or organization. To better understand how daunting a challenge this actually is, I present the following thoughts:

### **Who Is (and Isn't) a Brand? –**

What characterizes a personal brand? For starters, the branded individual is representative of an idea and a tangible product or products. Charles Dickens was probably the first name brand, meaning his name was clearly synonymous with his particular product, in this case, popular fiction with a social theme. His name on the first installment of a serialization sold copies in and of itself, according to Jane Smiley's 2002 biography of Dickens.

“Charles Dickens was more than a self-made man, he was a self-made phenomenon – he generated out of his own being all the energy and imagination to both envision his goal and get himself to it,” writes Smiley.

Martha Stewart is a brand -- a brand that reflects her own inimitable style and good taste. Say “Charles Dickens” or “Martha Stewart” and listeners immediately understand the corresponding ideas or products they represent. But it's more than celebrity or popular name recognition. A brand name must be a pro-active participant in his/her own branding efforts. For instance, we may think of computers or technology when we hear the name “Bill Gates,” but he is not a brand name. He doesn't want to be; he'd rather his company's name and product line be imprinted in the minds of the consumer. In fact, the moniker “Bill Gates, philanthropist” may be more to his liking. On the other hand, Charles Dickens worked hard at creating his unique image to promote his books commercially. He dressed nattily, toured the continents, and spoke publicly whenever he could. Shakespeare never did this. In fact, he assumed such a low public profile, it has been difficult for biographers to fully research his life.

Some big-name fashion designers are brands – Tommy Hilfiger, Louis Vuitton and shoe designer Jimmy Choo. Britisher Richard Branson of Virgin Records and airline fame comes close, as do Hugh Hefner and deceased puppeteer Jim Henson. Colonel Sanders is definitely a brand, as well as Dr. Scholls, if he even exists as a real person.

**You Give Love a Brand Name** -- Branding isn't the same as self-promotion or super stardom (which has no real meaning in today's world anyway.) Bestselling author Stephen King is not a brand, but he comes closer than, say, James Patterson or Danielle Steele, as popular and as well publicized as they are. Oprah would fall into the category of media icon, but she is not a brand because she is not associated with any one particular product. I know few performing artists who approach full brand name recognition, but

film directors Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Wells come close to being brands. Besides, popularity in one or another field of endeavor may be fleeting. The actress Elke Sommer evolved into a talented painter with an instructional show on PBS. A true brand name is immortal in one specific category only.

### **Why Would You Want to Be Branded Anyway?**

Charles Dickens had a compelling reason to brand himself. His financial success hinged mightily on his ability to become a household word in an era when communications channels were limited. A company's branding is tied closely to the consumers' perceptions of value, so if that value is altered in ways that can't be controlled (think hurricane), where does that leave you, the branded individual? If you have any doubt about this, think back to the negativity and media frenzy surrounding Martha Stewart's arrest and incarceration. Martha set out to brand herself and was successful, but her company was in jeopardy when things went wrong. Of course, Martha masterfully rebounded. Today, her brand is stronger than ever.

Business owners who request a marketing program that includes branding themselves as individuals, especially at the local level, would be better served with branding strategies that meld with business strategies. Branding individuals is a costly (think millions\$) endeavor that takes years of very public exposure. Don't ask for branding when some good solid publicity is all you really need.

#####