

People As Brands

PR clients often request branding services – not for their products or services, but for themselves. By asking to “be branded”, they are asking to become a brand that the world will recognize and understand at a mere glance of their name. Branded wanna-bes don’t suggest that it’s fame they’re after -- which might be accomplished instead by employing some hard-core publicity tactics -- they want the level of recognition that imparts instantaneous information about the unique culture that surrounds them.

We say: “Use a Kleenex!” not “Use a facial tissue!”; we say “Get me a Xerox of that document!” not “Get me a photocopy.” It’s *that* level of brand recognition people often believe they’re after. By requesting branding services, they are suggesting they want to be a Charlie Brown or a Peter of the “Peter Principle” or a Mr. Dow Jones. Or someone who is the penultimate representation of something they hold dear – like religion, or culinary good taste or used tires. In the latter case, they want to be THE Used Tire King!

Or they don’t really want that at all. I contend that when most clients ask for branding, all they’re really after is some sound promotion for their business. And they’d like their name firmly attached to the messages, thank you very much.

Name that Brand

What characterizes a personal brand? For starters, the branded individual is representative of an idea, a service, or a product. Charles Dickens was the first name brand, meaning his name was synonymous with great, sociologically-themed fiction. His name as author on the first installment of a serial in a magazine sold thousands. His name on a poster announcing him as a guest reader, created a rush at the box office.

“Charles Dickens was more than a self-made man, he was a self-made phenomenon,” writes Jane Smiley, one of his many biographers.

Martha Stewart is a brand -- a brand that reflects her own inimitable style and good taste. Say “Charles Dickens” or “Martha Stewart” or “John Deere” and listeners immediately understand the corresponding ideas, products or services 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. 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 an image that would work to make him a commercial success. 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 with a full line of products that carry their name – Tommy Hilfiger, (Coo-Coo) Chanel, Calvin Klein, and shoe designer Jimmy Choo. Colonel Sanders is definitely a brand, as well as the benevolent Dr. Scholls, if he even exists as a real person. Jacquelyn Smith has a branded line of fashions sold exclusively at K-Mart, but she's not a brand. But Vera Wang? Now there's a brand.

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. A true brand name is immortal in one specific category only, such as retail.

Branding Woes

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, 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 chaos when things went wrong. Of course, Martha masterfully rebounded. Today most everyone agrees, 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 and years of very public exposure. In other words, don't ask for branding when some cool personal publicity working in synch with a solid advertising plan is what you really need.