

# Is Your Organization Ready to Move to the Next Level of Brand Management Competency?





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By Karl D. Speak

Consistently building a strong brand is more about process than money. This article presents a simple framework to evaluate an organization's level of brand management competency and offers a path to get to the next level.

Sometime during the last decade brand management seemed to have come of age. Moving from a marketing specialty practiced by a sophisticated set of marketing professionals, to one embraced by the broader set of marketers. For some of us long-time brand management practitioners this evolution is something to celebrate and further encourage.

The word "brand" has now become so colloquial in use that it seems to have replaced the word "marketing" in the common business lexicon. Talking is not the same as doing. Talking about fitness is not the same as conducting daily 45-minute P90X workout sessions. Likewise giving marketing managers brand manager titles is not likely to build stronger brands. The good news is brand management is not rocket science and improving one's competency doesn't require getting a Ph.D. With discipline any organization and marketing professional can continue to move to the next level of brand management competency.

Much like fitness improvement, marketers can benefit from a proven framework to guide improvement in their brand management competency. This short article provides a framework to reflect on the brand

management competency of an organization and a few thoughts about moving to the next level.

After working with many different types and sizes of organizations for the better part of 28 years, I have observed a few general things that seem to apply across the spectrum of organizations.

- Consistently improving brand management competency has more to do with discipline and process than money
- Measurement matters, but relationship intuition separates the great from the good
- Over-achieving brand managers have a harmonious connection to the brand's consumers

At the same time, I have learned that using a simple eight-point check list can provide valuable insights to improving an organization's brand management competency.

Some organizations are ready to go to the next level of brand management competency and others are content to stay where they are. Having a logical conversation about an organization's brand management competency and desire to change will provide clarity for



the organization and in some cases prevent some marketers from creating a deeper dent in their foreheads! The remainder of this article is dedicated to helping foster a sane and productive discussion about brand management competency.

### **Determining the Level of Brand Management Competency**

Every organization has a brand, and all organizations manage their brands to some extent, whether actively or passively, consciously or on autopilot. To gauge the relative degree to which your organization effectively manages its brand, envision a spectrum of brand management competency. At one end are those organizations that have only an elementary understanding of brand and little experience in brand building. At the other end of the spectrum are organizations that understand brand on a very sophisticated level and dedicate a significant amount of time and resources to a high level of brand management. Your organization, like most others, probably falls somewhere in the middle – you’re most likely not at a beginning level of brand management, but you aren’t a callused expert at it either.

Now, divide the brand management competency spectrum into three segments, and you’ve got a tool to evaluate your brand management competency. At the left is *Level One - Product Leads Brand*, into which organizations fall whose brand management efforts are primarily product-management based. Many, many organizations fall into this generation of brand

*Few are the number of organizations that really understand the emotional element of their brand’s equity.*

management competency. Organizations displaying a Level One brand management competency fall into one of two different categories – either fast-growth companies that have capitalized on the strength of a single product or technology or an organization that has never moved beyond their trade-driven formula for sales success. Organizations in *Level Two - Brand Leads Product* have experienced a “change initiative” or have been influenced by a new executive in such a way that results in an increased focus on customer relationships. And finally, in *Level Three - Brand Leads Organization* are organizations that view customer relationships as assets.

On the next page is a straight-forward table I developed to help organizations understand their brand management competency. Along the top are the three levels of competency. Down the side are eight brand management competency indicators. The manner and degree to which organizations perform in these eight areas generally determines where they fall within the matrix. Now, your organization may not fit completely into one of

the levels; chances are you’re better at some of these things than others. Finding out where your organization is on the spectrum is the first step to improving its brand management competency.

**Brand Semantics**, or how your employees talk about brand, is one of the quickest ways to get a handle on your organization’s brand management competency. In a Level One organization, the word “brand” is virtually interchangeable with the word “logo.” In a Level Two company, a limited group of individuals, often from the marketing or advertising department, will



# Brand Management Competency Framework

	Level One – Product Leads Brand	Level Two – Brand Leads Product	Level Three – Brand Leads Organization
<b>Brand Semantics</b>	Logo	Specialist Language	Common Language
<b>User Knowledge</b>	Anecdotal	Fact-based	Broad-based, Current
<b>Identity System</b>	“Identity Creep”	Articulated, Coordinated	Refined, Economical
<b>Brand Point of View</b>	Feature-based	Relationship- based	Emotion and behavior-based
<b>Brand Extendability</b>	Limited use; feature set differentiation	Expanding use; different product, similar compe- tence base	Proactive strategy, including licensing; cross category and behavior extensions
<b>Decision Support</b>	Limited Guidelines	Enhanced Guidelines	Learning-based
<b>Brand Management Skill</b>	Product Management	Brand Specialists	Brand Mentors
<b>Senior Management</b>	Passive, Uninterested	Support through participation	Brand Leaders



become familiar with the language of brand, and begin incorporating it into meetings and discussions. Unfortunately, they're the only ones who know this secret code, which limits the extent to which the entire organization can have a hand in brand management. Provide everyone with a primer on brand semantics and brand becomes the common language, spoken freely and clearly. Brand becomes more than identity or an expression of relationships. It becomes a rallying point and a statement of purpose for all future efforts.

**User Knowledge** is essential when you understand that a brand is an expression of the relationship established between you and your users or consumers. The more you know about them, the better you can aim your marketing, your products and your services at their needs. In a Level One organization, unfortunately, user knowledge is often limited to anecdotes collected by the sales force. Facts are, of course, always preferred over such second-hand stories, and as an organization's brand management competency matures, quantitative, projectable brand research becomes increasingly valued and prioritized. A Level Two organization will typically have conducted a few quantitative studies. A Level Three organization has an expert competency conducting research on its targeted consumers, using a coordinated, proven portfolio of research tools.

An **Identity System** keeps your brand from becoming overextended, or morphing into a disorganized, confusing jumble of product identities. Every new product iteration, every new feature, every new promotion is an opportunity to make a bigger mess of the brand's identity and perception,

*A well-conceived and managed brand identity system is the aerodynamics of brand building.*

and usually, Level One organizations suffer from "identity creep" to some degree. A more mature organization begins to articulate an identity system that is clear about what is permissible and what is not. And more importantly, somebody(ies) within the organization has been empowered to refuse suggestions for identities that fall outside the established system (more on this below). And in a Level Three company, the identity system is streamlined: a minimal number of identities are in use, and the system of use is clearly established. Fewer identities mean, of course, increasingly effective, efficient and economical marketing efforts. A well conceived and managed brand identity system is the aerodynamics of brand building.

**Brand Point of View** is just that – what the brand stands for. In other words, a brand's point-of-view is an articulation of the values on which the brand is based. As organizations define their brands, they begin communicating them more clearly — both internally and externally. Eventually, the brand is viewed as what it truly is, an expression of a valued and powerful relationship. That point of view gives the brand tremendous power. Level One companies, with their product-based orientation, tend to discuss their brand in terms of product features.

Level Two organizations increasingly focus on what the brand does for the customer, and Level Three companies can and do discuss at length the emotional payoff customers receive from the brand. Developing a clear, authentic brand platform that defines the corporate brand's point of view will create the most leverage in improving an organization's



brand management competency.

**Brand Extendability** is the yang to the identity system's yin. Brand power can have a variety of applications, but like all power, it must be used wisely. As this power is understood, it can be applied to logical extensions, limited at first to, say, some feature differences. In time, however, as the organization learns to handle this power more deftly, it can be cautiously extended to different products within a similar competency base. A good example would be a variety of car care products that may have developed from a popular wax or polish. Eventually, experience and expertise may allow for even greater extensions across categories and consumer behaviors. It may even include licensing. Be careful.

Once it's out there, it can be very hard to pull it back.

### **Decision Support**

for brand begins with a limited set of guidelines. This is also a limiting set of guidelines. These guidelines quite naturally evolve with brand semantics, a growing base of user knowledge, a change in brand point of view and identity, and of course, senior management attitudes. But when it becomes a true support tool rather than a set of rules and regulations, a big change occurs. Brand managers develop a community within the organization in which they can share ideas and experience. This is one of the few times when "synergy" is not a cliché.

**Brand Management Skill** is not the same as product management although the two are often viewed as interchangeable. That's to be expected if "brand" and "logo" are also interchangeable. There was a time when the

call for more brand building was heard as a call for bigger marketing budgets. This is changing. Brands are being managed by brand specialists who are taking leadership roles in brand management, developing and applying their influence and experience, and becoming brand mentors.

**Senior Management** is the turbocharger of brand management improvement. Brands simply cannot flourish in organizations in which the top people merely give brand management a nod and a smile and hand it off to the marketing department. Senior management needs to ask questions, get involved, and get behind brand management

initiatives to build user knowledge, develop an identity system, and define the brand's point of view. Many brand managers find this initially scary, but in the long run, it's a very good thing.

*Senior management is the turbocharger of brand management competency improvement.*

Yes, there are telltale signs that will give you an indication of the brand-management competency level of an organization. As an example, look for inconsistency in the way different people in the organization describe the product or the company. Review a cross-section of an organization's marketing communications materials – the further down the spectrum of brand management competency, the more integrated and consistent the messages, images and creative treatment. Or for that matter, look at how consistently the corporate or product identities are used throughout the organization. The bottom line is that the eight factors outlined in the Brand Management Competency Framework will provide you with a robust and understandable way for you and your team to



evaluate your customer-relationship-building discipline.

### Doing Something About It

Frustrated marketers get worn out, a lose/lose proposition for the individual and the organization. An organization's brand management competency is not an indictment but a reality that presents an opportunity for a passionate, achieving marketing professional. Let's take an organization that is stuck firmly in Level One — product-oriented brand management competency. There's no shortage of excellent brand management help available, much of it in the form of books, case studies, workshops, and a few experienced independent consultants. By developing a

*Any and every effort to improve your organization's brand management competency will pay-off with stronger customer relationships.*

brand-learning team, this information can be studied, shared and disseminated throughout your organization. The more people you have involved, the greater the likelihood of finding

situations to employ brand-based solutions. These are excellent opportunities to learn by doing.

As your organization acquires knowledge,

and in time experience, you can begin targeting specific areas of brand management competency. Don't try to change everything at once. It gets messy. Focus on internal attitudes as manifested in Brand Semantics and Brand Point of View. Begin developing the first vestiges of an identity system and acquiring user knowledge from sources such as sales, distribution, and of course, users. In time, your organization's first tentative steps into the sunshine of brand management will turn into a parade. And everyone loves a parade.

Now, don't kid yourself. This is a lot of work. Getting an entire organization thinking and moving in the same direction is a task not unlike getting your spouse to sign up for fitness training. Even if they know they should, some of them just don't want to go there without a little nudging support.

Determining the brand management competency of an organization is straightforward. We developed the brand management competency framework as a tool for organizations to evaluate how their day-to-day activities support consistent customer relationship building. It is important to realize that brand management competency is a matter of degree. It's not a question of ready or not. It's a question of how ready. Remember every organization works on building customer relationships every day. The point is to incorporate a continuous improvement mindset to brand management as a proactive business discipline to make the process efficient and the result is a more engaged and profitable set of customers.

# About Karl D. Speak

Karl D. Speak is a global expert known for his pragmatic and unconventional approach to using brand as a leadership platform for gaining customer loyalty and employee engagement. Karl's innovative work on corporate brand strategy, personal brand and internal brand building has been implemented in companies in 23 countries. His best selling book, *Be Your Own Brand*, is translated into 12 languages and has sold over 80,000 copies. In 2011 a revised and expanded version of *Be Your Own Brand* was released to leverage the global success of the first edition and the growing popularity of personal brand.

Through Brand Tool Box, Karl has implemented his contemporary approach to brand management and internal brand building with a wide range of corporate clients. Clients such as 3M, LeadingAge, American Express, AT&T, BASF, BMW, Cabela's, Cargill, Consumers Energy, EDMC, FedEx, Honeywell, IBM, ING, Mosaic, Motorola, Securian, Skandia, Sony Corporation, St. Jude Medical, Syngenta, Target Corporation, The Scotts Company, The Wall Street Journal, Toro, and Walgreens have benefited from Karl's consulting and internal brand building programs.

Karl has taught in the MBA programs at University of Minnesota, Saint Thomas University, and has been guest lecturer at University of Westminster in London, Capella University, ESADE University in Madrid, among others.



Karl D. Speak  
Principal of Brand Tool Box, Ltd.



# About Brand Tool Box, Ltd.

Brand Tool Box, Ltd. is the global leader in developing and implementing internal brand-building programs. It is a unique professional services organization melding world-class brand expertise and organizational development best practices creating engaged employees that consistently deliver what's most important to customers.

Since our beginning in 1984 we continue to use our pragmatic approach, collective brand management expertise and attention to details to solve important brand-related business problems for our clients. We hold ourselves accountable to two important standards: we provide solutions and services that consistently meet or exceed our clients' expectations and we improve the brand management competency of our clients.

For almost three decades our clients have called upon us to provide powerful brand strategies for a wide array of business issues – ranging from global corporate branding assignments to brand building for non-profit organizations. Our wide landscape of client experiences has enabled our firm to develop a proven expertise and practical approach in brand management.



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