

# Executive Brand Leadership





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By Karl D. Speak

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Although senior executives provide the spirit and the discipline for building strong brands, they don't need to be tactical brand managers to understand whether or not their organization is delivering their brand's promise. What they do need to know, however, are the right questions to ask. When advertising and marketing managers discuss brands they frequently speak in a nomenclature that impedes communication with senior management. By asking the right questions, brand-aware executives learn whether or not their managers' efforts consistently fulfill the brand's promise and they become steadfast guardians for these important corporate assets

Executive brand leadership is a management tool senior managers need to lead their organizations. Successful, brand-savvy executives cultivate five key tenets of brand leadership:

- Understand the organization's core brand -building strengths.
- Ensure that the organization's brand possesses a distinctive point of view.
- Encourage a well-structured set of brand identities.
- Establish consistency as a priority in communicating the brand's voice.
- Build brand leadership throughout the organization.

Tenet 1: Understand the Organization's Core Brand-Building Strengths.

Organizations with strong brands have one thing in common: they build enduring, loyal relationships with their customers. All successful organizations master the discipline of building distinctive relationships in their marketplaces. What differs among them are the core strengths each organization develops for achieving these coveted relationships. Some organizations become excellent in building and growing trade or sales- force-based relationships. Others foster attractive relationships



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



based on their outstanding product development skills. Certainly, there are organizations whose superior marketing skills allow them to create consistently strong demand from their end users, the consumers. In approaching brand management, executives need to understand that most organizations demonstrate an inherent bias toward one or several methods in their relationship-building skills. Relying too much on one core competency, though, is dangerous and ultimately weakens long-term brand-building power. For example, some organizations develop strong product brands at the retail level because they direct efforts into their relationships with retailers. Their confidence in these relationships often results in the organization placing less emphasis – and fewer resources – on consumer brand-building competencies. Companies practicing these confining strategies become vulnerable to changes in their one-on-one relationship with the retailer.

## Executive brand leaders need to inspire, motivate, and empower employees to become brand champions.

One-dimensional brand strategies ultimately weaken the organization's relationships with its retailers. Clearly, the challenge is to achieve balance within each organization's brand-building skills. Companies with the strongest brands use a balanced approach, carefully coordinating their many different relationship-building competencies to serve the broader brand promise.

### **Tenet 2: Ensure that the Organization's Brand(s) Possesses a Distinctive Point of View.**

The strongest, most admired brands share three common elements. The brands are:

- Distinctive – they possess a point of view
- Relevant – they appeal to their target market
- Consistent – they communicate a uniform message



Great brands are distinctive. They have a point of view on what they do and how they relate to their customers. Loyal customers admire industry-leading brands and respect their point of view. World-class brand management starts with a clear definition of the brand. The organization documents and thoroughly understands the brand's core dimensions and emotional appeal to its targeted consumers. Thus, an important task of every executive is to challenge the organization to define clearly the brand's point of view and work to ensure that the brand's distinctive platform continues to shine.

### **Tenet 3: Encourage a Well-Structured Set of Brand Identities**

More often than not, organizations assemble a messy collage of product names, creating a confusing system of brand names for their products and services. Whether these activities spring from poor judgment, inattention to details, or brand management ignorance, ultimately they dilute the organization's brand-building activities. Moreover, they also create hidden inefficiencies in the marketing communications budget.

Very few organizations can afford to build very many brands. At the same time, product marketing without the intent of building a lasting brand equity is truly "old economy" thinking. Executives need to challenge their marketing teams to commit to a clearly identified brand identity framework. Most companies need to define specific marketing policies that discourage the development of new brand names. Developing new names not only takes valuable time and resources, but usually results in the targeted customers encountering a confusing landscape of new relationships. Rather, companies ought to marshal efforts to capitalize on their current brand's equity by developing new products that strengthen and serve it. Building a strong brand is hard enough; there is no room for inefficiencies.

### **Tenet 4: Establish Consistency as a Priority in Communicating the Brand's Voice.**

Consistency is the hallmark of all strong brands. An integral part of creating a loyal, trusting relationship with customers is the consistent communication and actions that surround a brand. A major challenge facing most organizations is how to balance the need for fresh, poignant brand communications while maintaining a consistent brand voice. Integrated brand-based marketing communications is a requirement for effective brand communications.

Successful brand management requires a set of tools, such as corporate identity guidelines, packaging style guides, advertising creative briefs, or print design templates, that reinforce consistency in brand communications. But they alone are not enough. Consistency is a discipline. Unfortunately, creating clear, distinctive brand building communications cannot be achieved just by following rules or pre-conceived formats. Balancing the need to create strong brand statements with a disciplined consistency requires well-seasoned judgment.

The judgment and wisdom surrounding a brand reside within each organization's brand champions. A brand champion, or brand master, is a high-level manager who intuitively understands the brand and skillfully discerns its character in all brand communications. While senior level executives don't have to be the brand champion, they do need to ensure that one, or several, exist in their organization. Above all, the senior executive must recognize consistency in brand communications when he/she sees it, and always demand it from his or her organization.



### Tenet 5: Build Brand Leadership Throughout the Organization.

Brand building is everyone's job. At the core of all strong brands is an organization with a set of strong, shared values. It is difficult to find a strong brand that is not supported by energetic and passionate employees who care about the values behind the brand. Great brands achieve their equity from this fundamental belief system.

Brands are experiential. Before customers commit their brand loyalty, they want to see and feel the commitment behind the brand. Thus, the organization's human resources ultimately becomes its most powerful brand building weapon. Brand believers find hundreds of ways to make the right decisions about a brand – day in and day out.

Dramatic brand moments happen intuitively. Beliefs and commitment start at the top of every organization. Executive brand leaders need to inspire, motivate and empower employees to become brand champions. An organization that is charged up about its beliefs, vision and brand will always find hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of ways every day to make significant brand impacts that advertising alone can never buy. Brand leadership is an executive responsibility because, ultimately, great brands are built not on words, but actions.



## 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 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 10 different languages and has sold over 50,000 copies.

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 BASF, Cargill, Cabela's, Honeywell, Target Corporation, American Express, EDMC, Federal Express, ING, IBM, US Bank, BMW, Mosaic, AT&T, Motorola, Securian, Skandia, Syngenta, Walgreens, The Scotts Company, The Wall Street Journal, 3M, Toro and SONY have benefited from Karl's consulting and internal brand-building programs.

Karl holds a Masters Degree in Economics from the University of Minnesota. Karl teaches in the MBA programs at University of Minnesota, University of St. Thomas, and has been guest lecturer at University of Westminster in London, Capella University, ESADE University in Madrid, among others.

## 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.

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Brand Tool Box, Ltd.  
510 First Avenue North, Suite 605  
Minneapolis, MN 55403  
612.338.5009



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