



Women and Perceptions Accelerate, Why Hesitate?

Karl D. Speak
Best-Selling Author
President, Brand Tool Box, Ltd.

Dr. Heather Backstrom
Leadership Consultant



Women and Perceptions Accelerate, Why Hesitate?

Many successful women leverage the power of perceptions, earning opportunities to achieve greater success because they manage how they present themselves and emphasize their “natural” strengths to build a strong personal brand. A strong personal brand is one of the important factors that separates high performing, highly successful women from those who have similar talent and experience. So why do some women with similar talent have strong personal brands, while others do not?

An important part of the answer is that rather than hesitate, being concerned about how others may perceive them, successful women accelerate, consciously creating and proactively managing perceptions that accurately reflect their authentic selves and create their true, strong personal brand. In short, they find that being more of who they are will help them succeed.

Use the Power of Perceptions to Your Advantage

By contrast there is a large segment of women whose sensitivities to perceptions causes them pause and change the way they participate and contribute with others. There is even a portion of women who feel they are “held prisoner” to the perceptions held by others and hesitate or withhold from participating in meetings. If you, however, are a woman who might hesitate to take action because of how you think others perceive you this article will provide you with the encouragement and tools to

use the positive power of perceptions to be more of who you are and get more credit for your contributions.

As a woman, you have to manage two layers of perceptions to propel your success. One is the overall “brand of women” while the other is how others perceive your individual strengths and weaknesses. Savvy, high-achieving women know how to leverage the positive perceptions of both layers. They understand how to capitalize on the strengths of being a woman while reframing the negative misconceptions they often face. In turn, they also pay attention to how others see them as individuals. Combined, by managing these two layers, savvy high-achieving women can build a personal brand that highlights their individual talents - leveraging the power of brand synergy. You can too, when you know how to use perceptions to your benefit.

Managing perceptions is critical to your success as a woman in business. Based upon our many years of working with professional women, this paper will offer insights to help you un-



As a woman, you have to manage two layers of perceptions to propel your success.

derstand more clearly how to manage perceptions. It also will present fresh research that clearly demonstrates that women are keenly aware that perceptions of the “brand of women” and perceptions of them personally can constrain their success. We also will offer a practical framework to help you better understand the power of perceptions and offer guidelines you can use to manage perceptions proactively. By understanding and managing perceptions you can leverage your authentic strengths to build a stronger personal brand – and position yourself for greater success.

Being a Women is a Brand

What do we mean when we refer to “the brand of women”? We define it as the generally accepted perceptions of the distinctive qualities of women as a gender. The brand of women also may be thought of as the stereotypes or conventional images of women in our business culture. Women, for example, are seen as good relationship builders, strong collaborators, willing to ask clarifying questions, unafraid to ask for help and hesitant to make

decisions. We argue that by understanding and managing perceptions you can break down such stereotypes and earn credit for your authentic contributions at work, overcoming potential obstacles to achieving your goals.

One of the fundamental axioms of personal brand is that perceptions are reality, whether they are true or not. Positive perceptions are very helpful in building and growing both job-related opportunities and collegial relationships. Conversely, negative perceptions are an impediment. When you intentionally take active steps to manage how you're perceived and to develop a strong personal brand, you can set yourself up for greater success and more productive professional relationships. On the other hand, when you are lackadaisical about perceptions, you face an uphill climb that adversely affects your workplace opportunities and relationships. Perceptions of being a woman, both positive and



Some women feel more empowered to breakthrough the perceptual gridlock; while others can feel hamstrung by the way others may perceive them. How many feel empowered and how many feel held back?

negative, will influence how others perceive you as an individual. Successful women have learned how to leverage the positive perceptions of being a woman to build a stronger personal brand.

Our research indicates that the ethos of the brand of women is evolving, progressing in some areas while advancing little in others. The data indicate that how women, as a gender, are perceived in today's business world still shapes how they act. This in turn affects the development of their self-identity and their role at work.

To understand today's zeitgeist of the brand of women one can refer to Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In*, Katty Kay and Claire Shipman's *Confidence Code* or Ann Marie Slaughter's article in *The Atlantic*, titled "Why Women Still Can't Have it All". The point of view in these and other popular writings clearly is influencing the way women and men perceive the brand of women. (One may argue that an industry has sprouted to promote and exploit the notion of the brand of women.) Much of this work has reshaped the way women think about what they need to do to build a strong personal brand and succeed in the business world.

The Facts of Perception-Induced Hesitation

Women know full well that certain stereotypical perceptions may unfairly taint their personal brand and create unnecessary obstacles for their career development. They also know that they must hold themselves accountable to manage perceptions of themselves as individuals, ensuring they get credit for their accomplishments and are provided the opportunities that will leverage their authentic strengths. Some women feel more empowered to breakthrough the perceptual gridlock; while others can feel hamstrung by the way others may perceive them. How many feel empowered and how many feel



Harnessing the power of perceptions is important in building and growing your strong personal brand.

held back? We wanted to know so we conducted a research study to gain some insights into the perceptually empowered and the perceptually constrained.

The quantitative research study we conducted provided insights into women's attitudes about the way perceptions influence their behaviors and their success in business. The study was conducted during the summer of 2014 by collecting data from a well-distributed cross-section of 132 women, primarily in North America. Those responding met a demographic profile, including occupation title, representative of the population of business professionals. The study was segmented into two components: (1) perceptions of the overall brand of women and, (2) how perceptions of them as individuals can present obstacles to building a stronger personal brand.

Perceptions of the Brand of Women

Respondents evaluated a series of statements designed to assess how perceptions influence their behaviors, directly or indirectly. Women registered their agreement or disagreement with the statements (using a 5-point scale).

The following page is a summary of how women responded to each statement. The results show the number of women who "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" with the statements.

Key Research Findings

Women's Perceptions of the Brand of Women



Slightly more than 45 percent of the women agreed with the statement "I feel that I have to work extra hard or I have to stand out to overcome the stereotype of being a woman to get full credit for my contributions."



About one third agreed with the statement "As a woman I feel I am judged by a certain set of standards so I sometimes hesitate to be myself and that limits me from getting credit for my contributions."



About 40 percent agreed with the statement "Sometimes I am hesitant to offer a forceful opinion or be decisive or take a hard stance for fear of being perceived as being 'bossy' or known as a b----."



Over 60 percent agreed with the statement "As a woman I am a natural caretaker and sometimes I am too concerned about others feelings and therefore I may change what I say or how I act with certain people."



47 percent agreed with the statement "Some people have certain perceptions about me that I don't feel are accurate and it is a real challenge for me to change those perceptions."



Almost 50 percent agreed with the statement "With some people I change how I act or what I say based upon how I think they think I should act or what I should say."



Nearly 60 percent agreed with the statement "Sometimes I am too self-critical which causes me to second guess myself and hold back with my comments or actions and this limits my ability to make a contribution."



In about 40 percent of the cases women agreed with the statement "I have certain perceptions of myself that sometimes limit my participation in conversations/activities that I could be contributing to."



More than 50 percent agreed with the statement "Sometimes I feel that some women dismiss other women and their ideas but if a man says the same thing, then the idea or thought is accepted or recognized by the women as making a contribution."



More than 70 percent agreed with the statement "Sometimes I feel like women are more competitive with other women than they are with men."



55% agreed with the statement "Sometimes I am overly concerned about how someone perceives me that I spend too much time focused on 'why does he/she perceive me that way' versus 'what am I doing that is creating that perception.'"

Key Finding. The study's important finding is that a sizeable segment of women hesitate to act or contribute in groups because of their preoccupation with how they are perceived or how they might be perceived. If you're in this group, you know that these perceptual roadblocks are likely to keep you from contributing on teams and in business activities. These external constraints on your contributions can severely inhibit the growth of your personal brand and therefore could limit your future opportunities to leverage your strengths. Your keen sensitivity to perceptions can distract you from making contributions in your professional life. This is in contrast to other segments of women who harness the positive power of perceptions to build a strong personal brand. Some women become prisoners of perceptions, while others proactively manage perceptions to their benefit.

Perceptions Can Be Managed

Perception is reality. Sound familiar? When your personal brand is at stake, what you think matters a whole lot less than what other people think. Your brand exists on the basis of a set of perceptions and emotions in others' heads.

The good news about a perception or emotion is that once it is locked in place, it has tremendous staying power. That's the so-called bad news, too. The solution is to commit to taking intentional actions each day to manage the perceptions others hold of you. Highly personalized perceptions and emotions stick with a person. Their staying power gives a relationship its resilience. Once people accept the basic values of your brand, they judge their subsequent experiences with you against that norm — they interpret the actions they experience or observe in the context of the values they believe to be at the heart of your brand.

Although you may understand that other people have certain perceptions about you, you may not make the effort to proactively manage the perceptions you leave with others. Why is that? You may be confident that you will leave the right impression. Or you may feel that influencing what others think is too difficult. You may claim not to care about what others think of you. Frankly, like thousands of people we've asked, you may not be sure exactly what perceptions you want to leave.

Key Finding:

Your keen sensitivity to perceptions can distract you from making contributions in your professional life.

Harnessing the power of perceptions is important in building and growing your strong personal brand. Because others' perceptions define your personal brand, being purposeful about managing those perceptions is critically important. Let's be clear that perceptions significantly affect how people relate with and react to you. And in some cases perceptions may influence whether people will even take the time to meet with you or whether they will want to work with you. So to leverage your personal brand and get the most out of your relationships you must improve how you manage the perceptions you create.

Even with the best intentions, managing the perceptions of others is not easy. We commonly view ourselves one way while others



It can be so frustrating when it feels like you are held hostage by a perception that mischaracterizes you or where you don't get credit for personal or professional qualities you have worked so hard to attain.

may have a very different perception. Someone who takes pride in being a hard worker, for example, can come across to other as a workaholic. Who's right? How does that difference in perception weigh on their relationship? Someone who takes pride in being well informed may strike others as a know-it-all. Whose point of view matters more? In the end, the other person's perspective will clearly influence how they perceive and relate to you.

Many reasons may account for the difference in how you perceive yourself and how others perceive you. For starters everyone views others through their own set of lenses, so to speak. Those lenses are colored by their life's experiences, their attitude or how they feel about themselves at a given time. The result is that people may interpret your actions or words differently, and those interpretations may vary at different times.

Building a strong brand requires a level of wisdom, commitment and flexibility to ensure that your actions and words leave a perception that consistently reinforces how you want others to perceive you. No one said building a strong personal brand wouldn't take some effort! But we can tell you the (potential) benefits will be worth it.

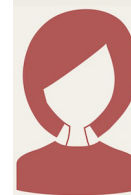
Another point to keep in mind is that of actions and intentions. People sometimes base their perceptions on your actions and sometimes on your perceived intentions. No matter what the case, perceptions are what matter because they're reality. Perceptions define your brand. And you must hold yourself accountable for the perceptions you create; you cannot rely on your intentions or actions to do the job alone.

So what's the bottom line and why should you work so hard to manage the perceptions others have of you? It's all about the gap. Remember hard worker whom others see as a workaholic? The size of the gap between how you want to be perceived and the way others perceive you will greatly influence the general tenor and productivity of your relationships. A narrower gap will support productive and enjoyable relationships. Conversely a wider gap will result in relationships in which you have to put more effort into getting things accomplished and in which interactions may be less fun. Mind the gap and perceptions can be your friend.

Personalizing the Power Of Perceptions

Perceptions that are an accurate reflection of who you are is all you can ask. We all know that it's easily said and difficult to pull off. Perceptions can be fickle, unfair and elusive. Sometimes certain perceptions exist that are misinterpretations of our true self. In other cases, people have perceptions that are blind to qualities that we know are real and acknowledged by only a minimum number of people. It can be so frustrating when it feels like you are held hostage by a perception that mischaracterizes you or where you don't get credit for personal or professional qualities you have worked so hard to attain. We wanted to find out how women felt about these two types of perceptual stumbling blocks.

To gain some specific insights about the perceptual quandaries women are experiencing we asked respondents in our study to answer two open-ended questions. The response rate to both questions was very high with virtually everyone providing one or more comments to each question. The responses from these two personal questions clearly indicate that perceptions can work against you or keep you from getting credit for your hard work, strengths and values.



Every interaction creates an opportunity to frame or reframe how you are perceived.

Key Research Findings

Perceptions About Me

Q: If you could change one perception that you believe people have of you, what perception would you change?

Leader/Manager

- “Being a woman I couldn’t possibly have had the experiences necessary to the top position.”
- “Not a leader equal to male counterparts.”
- “Not qualified to manage projects.”

“I think being young can be a harder stereotype to overcome than being female. Or perhaps being young and female combined is what is difficult.”

Youth or appearance of youth holds me back

“That my age means that I am not a skilled leader, despite the results that I obtain on a regular basis.”

Strategic

- “I have more strategic thinking skills than my CEO might realize.”
- “That I’m not strategic.”

- “Too sweet to be a tough boss.”
- “That I am cute and perky.”

Being cute/nice gets in the way

Directness, Intimidating, Toughness

- “I think that people perceive my tendencies to be opinionated and leading others as overly ‘bossy.’”
- “That I am bossy or bitchy if I need to take a hard stance on a decision in the office.”
- “That I push too hard to get things done.”
- “That I’m intimidating.”
- “That I am harsh because I am a direct communicator.”
- “My passion is mistaken for aggression.”

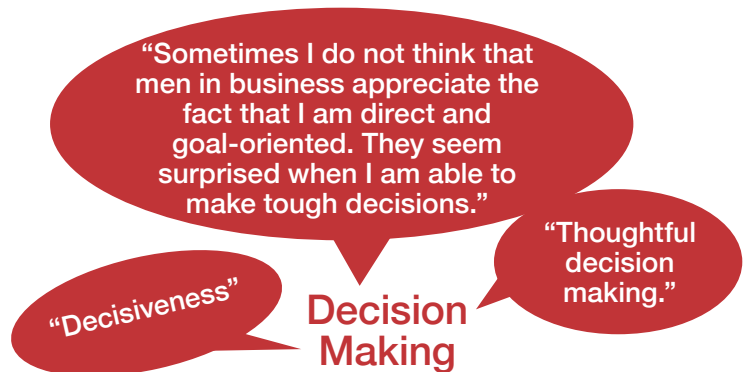
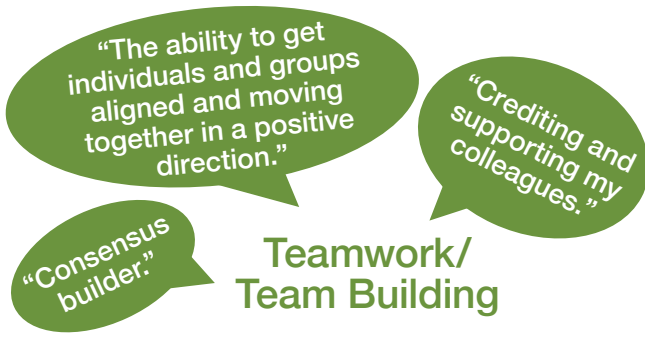
Quiet or Introvert

- “As an introvert sometimes I get the perception that extroverts don’t think to ask for my opinion because I am quieter than they are.”
- “That shyness equals disinterested!”
- “That I’m quiet because I’m shy—I’m actually quiet because I’m listening.”

Key Research Findings

Perceptions About Me

Q: What is a quality/strength that you believe you have that you don't get credit for in some of your relationships?



Perceptions linger, but aren't indelible.

Our research confirms some of the conventional wisdom surrounding women's frustrations when perceptions seem to unfairly characterize them or in other cases perceptions that fall short of the professional qualities that are central to their self-identity. Perceptions may be real, but they aren't indelible. We all must hold ourselves accountable to managing the perceptions others have of us. The process may be imprecise, but a diligent effort can produce satisfactory results.

Conscious, consistent effort can change the perceptions others have of you. A proven strategy for changing perceptions is to "undo by over-doing." Simply stated this means that you should authentically act in a way that counterbalances a perception that you need to change. You must deliver that action or behavior consistently and noticeably whenever possible for it to serve as an antidote to a specific perception. Below are some examples.

- If youth or appearance of being young is a concern, become aware of your language and use words that convey confidence and expertise. For example, rather than saying, "I'm not sure if this idea will work, but ..." instead say, "My recommendation is ..." State an opinion instead of couching it as a question. An example of this is, "Do you think it would work if we conducted a focus group?" versus "Let's conduct a focus group." Using language that showcases your inner confidence and expertise is just one strategy to begin shifting perceptions.
- If being perceived as too direct or intimidating is an issue, you might consider being more tactful when interacting with those that may perceive you as being intimidating. As an example, when expressing an opinion or making a recommendation leave room for others to chime in with a counter idea. Another approach might be to begin a response by asking clarifying questions or asking others their suggested approach to a situation. Acknowledge their contributions and provide your ideas in the context of adding to their ideas. Another tactic is to infuse the tone of your voice with a softer, assuring tenor and possibly speaking more slowly. Other helpful tactics may involve maintaining peer-to-peer eye contact and use open, approachable, relaxed body language during a conversation.



- If being quiet or an introvert is a perception you wish to change then consider one of the following strategies. Make a point of speaking at least once in each meeting. Speaking up, even once, can begin to change perceptions. Speak to a colleague before a meeting to exchange thoughts on the agenda items. That gives you an opportunity to talk with a person one-on-one and to state your point of view.
- Women in our study reported that they have qualities for which they don't believe they are receiving credit or acknowledgment. This included being empathetic, building teams, making decisions, being an expert and having drive or ambition. To strengthen any of these qualities, take one active step today to showcase that attribute. If it's the ability to create teams and build consensus, then weave an example of that into your workplace conversations. If it's your expertise, then offer an idea or recommendation, or create a tangible work product to demonstrate that.

Improve Your Ability to Manage Perceptions



With enough diligence and commitment, managing perceptions that reflect your authentic qualities can become second nature.

Perceptions can be accidental or purposeful. Successful women with strong personal brands manage perceptions in an unconsciously competent fashion; it is second nature to them. As a woman, you will benefit by committing to a process of becoming consciously competent in creating and managing the perceptions that reflect your authentic qualities. Becoming consciously competent begins with creating perceptions that reflect your authentic, distinctive qualities.

Here are a few of the key steps to begin the process of proactively, positively managing perceptions.

1. Decide what perceptions you want to create in the minds of others. Establishing perceptions doesn't have to be held to chance. Building a strong brand starts with deciding what perceptions you want to create. Determining the desired perceptions is a decision based on careful consideration and commitment. Decide on the set of perceptions you want to create, based on the following criteria: first and foremost focus on your distinctive qualities; target what is most important in your relationships; and be sure to base the targeted perceptions on the qualities you can consistently deliver.
2. Be accountable for creating perceptions as often as possible. Every action leaves an impression. You create some intentionally, though many you do not. We are all accountable for the perceptions we create. A lack of accountability can create unintended consequences in our relationships, which can suffer when there is a gap between how you want others to perceive you and how they actually do.
3. Measure the perceptions. Perceptions are real and can be measured. Continual improvement starts with measurement. A commitment to consistently measuring and assessing the perceptions others have of you is fundamental to the positive growth of your authentic personal brand.

With enough diligence and commitment, managing perceptions that reflect your authentic qualities can become second nature. The key is to be conscious and authentic.

Avoid Being a Prisoner of Perceptions

Don't allow yourself to be held prisoner of your perceptions or how others perceive you! Hold yourself accountable for managing perceptions. Understand that the perception someone else has of you may not be accurate, but it doesn't have to harm, hamstring or create a hurdle for your success. Here are a few strategies suggested to us from a number of successful women who manage perceptions to their betterment.

1. The brand of women is real and people subscribe to stereotypes, much to everyone's chagrin. Ignore the stereotypes and charge



As a woman, you will benefit by committing to a process of becoming consciously competent in creating and managing the perceptions that reflect your authentic qualities.

forward. As an example, if another woman gives a man credit for something you contributed don't seethe about it, sidestep it and make another contribution. Consistent contributions will not be overlooked or forgotten.

2. Be clear what your most authentic qualities are (start with one or two) and sharpen those skills. Demonstrate those qualities as often as possible. Consistently demonstrating those qualities is a sure fire way to establish and reinforce a perception that reflects your authentic strengths.
3. Hold yourself accountable to making a difference as often as possible. Making a difference stands out and makes for a lasting impression. Making a difference using one or two of your outstanding authentic qualities is one of the most reliable personal brand-building strategies. Consistent performance is easy for everyone to understand.
4. Don't be afraid to help others connect the dots. Occasionally and appropriately mention to others why you value your authentic qualities.
5. Seek out assignments or projects that play to your authentic strengths. Position the challenge and the results in the context of your authentic strengths.

Every interaction creates an opportunity to frame or reframe how you are perceived. Be positive and proactive about creating a set of perceptions that puts the best light on your authentic qualities.

Proactively and consistently managing the perceptions that exist about you will go a long way to enable you to BE MORE OF WHO YOU ARE and build a strong personal brand that will place you in a position to accomplish more and be more successful, on your own terms.



“Do what you feel in your heart to be right - for you'll be criticized anyway. You'll be damned if you do and damned if you don't.”

Eleanor Roosevelt

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 100,000 copies. A revised and expanded version of *Be Your Own Brand* was recently released to leverage the global success of the first edition and the growing popularity of personal brand. *Be Your Own Brand* was one of the first books published on the subject of personal brand. This innovative book is the first on the topic to be viewed as a business tool to help employees find alignment with their organization as well as a personal development tool.

Brand Tool Box, Ltd., the company he founded 30 years ago, 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 to help organizations build and nourish customer-centric culture alignment.

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

Karl's boardroom experience includes being a board member of Mesa Holdings, VocalEssence, MAP and serving as the chair of the board of The Design Management Institute.

Dr. Heather Backstrom has more than 20 years of experience in all aspects of organization and leadership development including executive coaching, workshop design and delivery, team interventions and meeting facilitation. The breadth of her experience spans organizations in the for-profit, not-for-profit and public sector arenas.



She started her career in the private sector at Toyota and then expanded into the not-for-profit and public sector domains. Her rich expertise includes City of Hope National Medical Center, Beach Cities Health District, Moog and JPL. With a passion for learning and continuing education, Dr. Backstrom is also an adjunct faculty member with the University of Redlands where she delights in teaching undergraduate and MBA students.

Her love for leadership development work started early in her career, first as a trainer then as an instructional designer, OD consultant and executive coach. With keen insight on the interpersonal challenges that individuals and teams face Dr. Backstrom is adept at addressing leadership and organizational effectiveness issues.

An enthusiastic learner herself she received a doctorate degree in organizational leadership from Pepperdine University.

She is a volunteer with the Tournament of Roses Association and on the Board of Directors with the American Red Cross San Gabriel Valley-Pomona Chapter. She is a member of Provisors and Leadership Pasadena.

“Women and Perceptions: Accelerate, Why Hesitate?” is sponsored and produced by Brand Tool Box, Ltd. Brand Tool Box, founded in 1984, 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 to help organizations build and nourish customer-centric culture alignment. Brand Tool Box’s consulting processes, training programs and organizational development tools have been successfully implemented in companies across virtually all industry segments including non-profits and government organizations.

Brand Tool Box has successfully packaged its intellectual property into a portfolio of training workshops, coaching and consulting templates and personal development tools. The products have been used in a range of business and personal development applications, ranging from internal brand building, sales training, to leadership-development coaching.



Brand Tool Box, Ltd.

510 First Avenue North, Suite 605

Minneapolis, MN 55403 USA

www.brandtoolbox.com

info@brandtoolbox.com

All material herein is copyright protected and remains the sole property of Brand Tool Box, Ltd. No part of this material may be reproduced, distributed, displayed, adapted, performed, arranged or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission from Brand Tool Box, Ltd.