

Continuous

Branding

**For Service-Based Organisations
Ambitious to Grow**

Craig Thatcher

CHAPTER 4

**Think of a Brand
as a Person**

To understand branding at the most basic level, it helps to think of a brand as a person. This taps into the same sort of relationships and emotional connections that people have with each other – as they do with brands.

The ability to think like this is especially useful to a service-based organisation like yours which relies so heavily on your people to engage your clients. Your people are the ones who personify your brand and help you build it through the way they appear, behave and communicate.

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Your clients relate to your brand like they do to people in their lives. This is because they treat their relationship with your brand just like all their other relationships. They probably have many friends but few real loves. If you want them to love your brand rather than just like it – be useful, be helpful and be relevant to them. Think about this for a minute. At a fundamental level your brand must be useful otherwise why does it exist? It needs to be helpful because an unhelpful service brand is a contradiction. Your brand must also be relevant to your clients because irrelevance is a death knell. And the real trick is to be relevant to the right type of client – not all clients are an ideal match for your brand.

Let's start at the birth. Our baby is given a first name and a family name. In other words a brand name. People change their name for a variety of reasons because they're no longer happy with it. Muhammad Ali changed his name from Cassius Clay shortly after converting to Sunni Islam. His name no longer fitted his beliefs and values. Others change their names because they want to run away from their past, or because they've done something they shouldn't have.

Probably the most usual reason to change your name is upon marriage – akin to a merger in brand terms. And the converse is married women who keep their maiden names either permanently, or in the workplace, because they attach importance to the personal recognition, values and history associated with their name. All these scenarios are easily transferable to the world of brand names.

EXAMPLE: I'm often asked whether I'd ever change a brand name. This should only be seriously considered if it has gone bust or let them down really badly. Carphone Warehouse is a more typical example – the name was a description of what the company did when it was founded in 1989. This was at a time when most portable phones were too bulky to carry and were called car phones. You wouldn't start a new business with a name like this now because the world has moved on. But you wouldn't change it either because it's been successful and is well recognised, merging in 2014 with Dixons Retail plc to create 'Dixons Carphone'. The word 'Carphone' was kept because of the valuable brand recognition and heritage that has been built up over more than twenty years. It would have been a costly mistake to rename and expunge a highly recognisable brand name from the record.

Getting back to our baby, if it has siblings then they'll probably share a physical family resemblance. But as they grow up, they'll find their own niches and don't tend to compete directly with each other for the same parental time and resources.

If you own or manage more than one service brand it's vital that you enable each of them to develop their own personality, skills and experience based on their particular market niches, otherwise they'll compete with each other rather than simply performing in their own respective markets.

EXAMPLE: Global automotive manufacturer, Volkswagen AG, has a very successful multi-brand strategy to grow sustainably into the best automaker in the world by 2018. It aims to do this by becoming a world leader in customer satisfaction and quality, and to be the top employer across the world. It plans to increase sales to more than 10 million units and achieve an operating profit margin of at least 8% before tax to create a solid financial position. Major components like engines and floorpans are shared across models. The company has streamlined the manufacturing processes so that parts are delivered just-in-time and assembled on flexible production lines that can be used for different brands and different models, so deploying capacity more flexibly across the whole group.

On the other hand, they're very careful about developing individual brands that appeal to every sector of the vehicle buying market whilst minimising the cannibalisation of sales of more expensive models with cheaper ones. This enables them to squeeze the most profit out of every vehicle. They achieve this with a mix of brand positioning, marketing, product design and managing the driver's after-sales experience. More expensive vehicles have better showrooms, higher service standards and specifications than their cheaper brands.

How many of us could tell the difference or would be bothered about a windscreen washer bottle that was made out of 1mm or 2mm moulded plastic? But we'd most certainly notice whether the quality of the steering wheel justified the price we were being asked to pay.

I appreciate that it's easier to achieve this difference with physical products than with services but the principles remain the same. It just means that if you have a multi-brand strategy then the individual brands should be clearly differentiated from each other by targeting them at specific segments. It also means that the way your people personify each of your brands should be different depending on the one they're representing. This only becomes hard to achieve when your organisation blurs the lines by relaxing the standards of appearance, behaviour or communication that defines each brand.

When our baby becomes a child and old enough to sign their own name, it's unique to them. It's like their own personal logo. Their genetic DNA and their parents' values help to determine their personality and this is expressed by their appearance, and the way they behave and communicate.

As they become teenagers, they make friends with individuals who share the same values as themselves and who like doing the same things. They learn from each other through shared experiences and they provide each other with help and support when needed.

Whilst some are serious about their relationships from an early age, others fall in and out of love. And quickly! When my son was fourteen, he told me he'd already had three girlfriends. Whilst this was a bit of a surprise to me, he did go on to say that his first girlfriend lasted two months, the second two weeks and the third for double maths!

People relate to brands in exactly the same way as they do with the rest of their relationships. Some chop and change brands as quickly as they change their hairstyle, make-up or clothes – just like teenagers do. They're always in tune with the latest fashion. Others fall deeply in love and are extremely loyal to each other over a lifetime. As a brand you want yours to be in long term relationships, not picked up for a one night stand – only to be dumped by text days later.

Have you ever wondered why so many people marry somebody at work? It's to do with values they share with the brand they work for and with each other; so they feel comfortable. After all they both joined the same organisation because they liked what it does, liked what it stands for, liked the ethos and the brand itself. It's a good start for a relationship!

Likewise, you want your clients to fall in love with your brand. They form an image of your brand in their mind using all their senses; sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste.

If you manage the way your brand appears, behaves and communicates with your clients by tapping into all their senses, then you'll provide a powerful experience for them. As a result it will be stronger and far more memorable. Anything at all that detracts from that makes it harder to persuade them that your brand is the best choice for them.

When a person sets up their home it says a lot about them as an individual, even without them being physically present themselves. So imagine if you looked around the home of a person you didn't know; something like the popular UK television programme 'Through the Keyhole' hosted by Keith Lemon. How would you work out what this person was like as an individual?

You'd use your senses to assess the following sorts of questions. What style is the house? How is it decorated and furnished? Is the garden well kept or over grown? What does the home smell like? Then in to the kitchen. I know Keith inspects the cleanliness of the oven but personally, I'd be interested in the quality of their cutlery. I know this sounds rather off centre, but I'm not keen on light-weight, flimsy knives and forks. They just don't feel right in the hand when you're eating. They can spoil the whole experience unless you're having a picnic when compostable cutlery feels more appropriate. All these types of things say a huge amount about you as an individual – without anyone even meeting you face to face.

So imagine letting your clients into your offices, showroom, restaurant or store without you or any of your people there to interact and sell to them. What would they think about your brand? They'll think precisely what their senses tell them and if you've not managed every aspect of that environment then the visual, audio, olfactory and overall quality clues may not present your brand as you want it to be perceived.

EXAMPLE: A few years back, we treated our grown-up children to a Christmas Day lunch at a luxury hotel on the Thames. The whole family had high expectations and it was a change from our tradition of me cooking lunch on Christmas Day. It wasn't a cheap experience either – you have to recompense people well to work over the holidays. But my heart and expectations dropped as we were welcomed at the door by the gentleman offering to take our coats. Behind him was a rack of cheap wire hangers. They just don't look or feel as good as wooden ones. They leave tell-tale marks in jackets and coats even when used for short periods of time. My expectations of the quality of service and our lunch plummeted in an instant. I'll spare you the rest of the saga as it all went seriously downhill from there. Just to say that the whole afternoon of service and food presentation perfectly matched the quality of those wire coat hangers.

Now what about your people and how easy they find it to personify your brand? Their appearance, behaviour and way they communicate will change depending on their circumstances – whether they're at home with their family, socialising with friends, or at work surrounded by colleagues, their boss and clients. For some, it will only be small changes whilst for others they will be significant. It all depends on how well matched your brand's values are to that person. The closer the match between your brand's values and theirs, the better they'll relate to your clients. You already recruit for attitude and values and not entirely for skills because changing the former without deep indoctrination cannot work in the long term.

When people have the right attitude and approach you can encourage and train them to personify your brand. Once you're confident in them, you'll need to give them the authority and discretion to flex their appearance, behaviour and communication depending on the particular situation in hand. This will help make your brand appear nimble and flexible rather than slow and unresponsive. Clients' expectations never stand still and markets are always shifting. In the same way that everyone needs to continuously learn new skills and experiences throughout their lives so they don't fall behind their peers, a brand needs to continuously develop, or it too, will fall behind the market.

As your clients' needs, expectations and aspirations change, you'll be able to alter the way your people engage and interact with them as well. Continuous change is built into your organisation so you don't have to stop and start!

So why don't all organisations do this? I can't answer that, but like most people I'm often disappointed by the quality of service I receive from airlines, banks, retailers, restaurants and trades people. What is the worst experience that you've ever had?

EXAMPLE: This bad service experience ranks at the top of my long list. When my son was about three years old he started to call a little rural pub near where we live – The Maniac's Pub after an experience there that was memorable for all the wrong reasons. My wife is a vegetarian and as it

was her birthday meal, I called into the pub the week before and booked a table with a young man. We agreed there and then what the vegetarian options would be. He reassured me that he'd organise the necessary ingredients and brief all the relevant people at the pub. We turned up at the agreed time but were worryingly greeted with a totally blank look. My heart sank. He disappeared off behind the bar and shortly afterwards, wild shouting erupted followed by furniture being thrown around upstairs. When he re-appeared he was being chased by the landlady. Their argument continued but finished abruptly with her shouting at him 'You're fired!' He then jumped on his motorbike and sped off into the distance. Needless to say, we went home without eating!

No matter how many times that pub has changed hands and changed names over the ensuing years – in our family it is always called The Maniac's Pub. We've applied our own unshakeable branding and it will never fully regain its position in our minds as a pretty and serene country pub. This is an interesting point because it is customers who think they 'own' a brand not the pub owner or landlady.

When you have a strong emotional connection with somebody it's hard to let them down or completely walk away, no matter how bad things are between you. The most obvious example of this is the inherent and powerful bond between a mother and her child.

As a service-based organisation you need to be

able to create an emotional connection between your brand and your clients. I don't mean some soft, wishy-washy kind of emotion either. I mean ones that are anchored by deep, relevant and meaningful reasons as to why they think your brand is the best one for them and their organisation. Ones that are so strong they seem to defy logic.

There is a final reason why you should think of a brand as a person and that's the emergence of 'personal branding'. You've probably noticed that it's taken off since it was first used and discussed by Tom Peters, the business author and speaker. It's the practice of people marketing themselves and their careers as brands with success coming from packaging their presence on and off line. Their physical appearance is obviously based on their body, hairstyle and clothing, and their behaviour and the way they communicate comes from their knowledge and experience. When all packaged together it provides a strong image occupying a unique position in our minds.

Personal branding is generally for business people, entrepreneurs and celebrities who use their names to endorse their own products or other people's brands. This is an interesting phenomenon when you think about what happens when a person is working on behalf of a service-based organisation. What has the most influence over clients? The personal brand or the service brand? Or is it a balance of the two? If it's the latter then how is this managed?

We know that clients like to buy from experts and from the people whose values they share. Many larger service-based organisations think their corporate service brand is more important to clients than the expertise of the individuals who sell to, and support them. It's a mistake to underestimate the power of these individuals and the strength of their personal brands. Although it's understandable why most organisations don't ever manage to balance them perfectly because it's a difficult task. You need to be proactively managing the relationship between your service brand or brands and the people who work for them.

What generally happens is the service brand doesn't allow the personal brand to be expressed and ends up being perceived as stuffy, corporate and out of touch in today's world. The trend now is for most clients to want a more personal, less formal and rigid relationship with brands. Besides, they have a lot more choice from owner managed brands or young entrepreneurial start-ups. This helps explain why individuals or small groups often break away from their corporate employers to set up niche service brands that tempt clients to leave with them.

In the next chapter I'm going to encourage you to focus on what's great about your brand – because great it is – and if you want to make it better you need to know where to focus your efforts.

Key points in this chapter

- People relate to service brands like their other personal relationships, using all their senses to set their expectation before actually experiencing the service itself.
- People with the right attitude and approach will personify your brand. Give them authority and discretion to flex their appearance, behaviour and communication depending on the particular situation in hand.
- If you have more than one service brand within your portfolio, make sure that the skills, experience and personalities enable each of them to compete strongly in their respective markets, and not with each other.
- Proactively manage the relationship between your service brand or brands and the personal brands of the key people that work for them.



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