

# The Power of the Personified Brand

How a charismatic leader can help  
you connect with consumers

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# What do Steve Jobs and Oprah Winfrey have in common?

They are both leaders that personify their brands—and do it so aptly that they’ve elevated them to near cult status.

What typifies one of these rare “brand leaders”? Although there is no set formula, there are several telltale signs that a CEO personifies a brand: They are extremely dynamic, articulate public speakers. A natural synergy exists between their personal voice and the company’s marketing voice. They are seen as the heart and soul of the company and make a measurable impact on the business. They command credibility among industry insiders, often because they “came up through the ranks.” In most cases, they are widely viewed as industry innovators and visionaries.

If your company’s CEO meets these criteria, you are well positioned to develop a “personified brand,” or a brand strongly linked to its high-profile leader. Brands that highlight this connection benefit in important areas: When a leader stands so prominently behind a brand, it gives the brand instant credibility. Because of their public stature, brand leaders are newsworthy by nature, which in turn keeps the brand fresh and interesting. **A brand connected to an individual, as opposed to a more abstracted corporation, is more likely to establish a personal connection with target audiences.**

Although there are powerful benefits associated with a personified a brand, companies should proceed with caution. First and foremost, the connection needs to be authentic. Pushing a CEO into the limelight who does not fully embody the brand and what it stands for can create confusion around the brand’s core message. Moreover, it is important that brand leaders are not overexposed and are presented in a true-to-life context. For example, although memorable, Chrysler’s recent “Dr. Z” ads were received with mixed reviews. Many consumers wondered if the caricatured Dr. Z could really be CEO of one of the world’s major automakers.

Which leads to a critical question: How can organizations credibly leverage the power of their brand leader? Companies should start by adopting strategies that make the most of their CEO’s existing brand-building activities. For example, they should document speaking engagements and use the Web to publicize and archive them for future viewing. To the extent possible, companies should also develop regular outreach mechanisms for their brand leader, so the public knows when and where they can tune in to see them. Steve Jobs’ Mac World keynote and Oprah’s *O Magazine* cover photo and introductory letter are excellent examples of this strategy.

To optimize the impact of a personified brand, companies should weave their brand leader’s voice and image into marketing communications. But ideally this is just the beginning: Companies should ensure that the essence of their brand leader remains an integral part of all aspects of the brand. In the best cases, this happens organically, but clever marketing can help reinforce the connection in people’s minds. For example, Charles Schwab’s “Ask Chuck” campaign, reminds investors that Charles Schwab’s personal commitment to investors is the driving force behind the company. In addition, materials tied to the leader should have a strong visuality and voice, immediately cueing recipients that the communication is coming directly from the top—and the heart—of the company.

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The most successful personified brands integrate their leaders so deeply into marketing communications that consumers can hardly distinguish between the brand leader and the brand itself. Although this level of integration is extremely unique, putting a human face on your brand will go a long way towards deepening its relationship with consumers.

### The Bob in Taylor Guitars

Bob Taylor of Taylor Guitars is the quintessential brand leader: the company's chief visionary, evangelist and technical whiz. When MiresBall started working with Taylor Guitars in 1995, **Bob's natural enthusiasm for guitars—and for pushing the bounds of engineering technology—permeated every corner of the company. It was infectious, and we quickly understood that bottling it was the key to driving the success of the Taylor Guitar brand.**

Working in close collaboration with Taylor's internal marketing team, MiresBall has focused on building a brand with Bob's thumbprint on it. All of Taylor's communications are infused with an attitude and voice that are unmistakably Bob's. A search for "Bob Taylor" on the guitar maker's website ([www.taylorguitars.com](http://www.taylorguitars.com)) tells the story: Links to videos of Bob's Factory Friday tours, his "Anything Goes" column and a calendar of Bob appearances are a few of the eighty-plus items listed. Much like Bob himself, the content associated with the enigmatic leader is fun, informative and never self-promotional.

Outside our work with Taylor Guitars, Bob actively serves as the voice of Taylor at events and in the media. When he does, he focuses on topics that underscore his role as Taylor's chief visionary: He talks in detail about the guitars that Taylor has in development and changes in the broader guitar industry. His consistent advocacy of the Taylor brand and of the industry further reinforces Taylor Guitar's role as a market leader—and continues to set Bob apart as a brand leader.

As a testament to the success of Taylor Guitars as a personified brand, the company frequently receives letters addressed directly to Bob, and musicians of all ages and skill levels seek him out at industry events.