

Chapter Two: The Leadership Brand

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is a popular place. It has been the stage of many movies, like *Good Will Hunting* and *A Beautiful Mind*.

Oh yeah, it's a pretty terrific school for the world's brightest minds.

Not only is MIT a popular spot for the world's academics for the first-timers in undergraduate school, but its graduate program is also pretty special, too.

A lot of great ventures and partnerships that have changed the world have come out of MIT.

I have even counted myself lucky to have been involved with a brainchild project turned corporation that birthed from this center of the academic galaxy.

But, what does MIT have to do with leadership let alone creating a leadership brand? Well, a lot.

As we start thinking about our leadership brand, let's first look at another popular and useful marketing term - personas.

The Personas

In thinking about partnerships turned into successful ventures coming out of MIT, the story has been told at an annual marketing conference that Brian Hallagan and Dharmesh Shah met at MIT Sloan School of Management during their graduate study.

"Who are they?" you're probably asking. They are at the founders of Hubspot.

Hubspot is a marketing platform that's gained much popularity over the years due to its functionality in both the platform itself and thorough customer training.

One word that comes up in the marketing world is personas.

Building on the teachings of the Hubspotology, personas are fictional, generalized characters that encompass the various needs, goals, and observed behavior patterns among a company's real and potential customers.

Creating personas is a valuable practice in marketing as doing so ensures that marketing tactics are in line with those people that marketing leaders are trying to target with their efforts to take some action like buying a product or service.

When I worked in marketing, I spent much time thinking and developing these fictional personas and how each aided to the effectiveness of my marketing campaigns.

I began thinking like these people. I started making decisions like these people. I felt like I were these people.

When I changed careers from marketing to organizational development, I kept thinking about personas — however, the transition from thinking about personas concerning marketing to that of leadership.

I also began to think about myself in relation to personas. I wasn't the same persona that I had been in marketing. I, too, was a new persona.

Catherine as the marketing manager persona needed to be focused on data and trends, bringing in revenue and motivating those in sales to push products.

The marketing Catherine persona wasn't one that I loved being. I didn't find value in it. I didn't feel like a leader. I hated the work. I even hated myself sometimes.

Catherine as the organizational development persona needed to be warm and approachable, able to connect with people and flexible to employee needs.

The organizational development Catherine persona felt more like me and who I was as a person. It fit my values, and I felt like a leader. Plus, I liked who I was.

Both of these career personas required that I be hard-working, driven and dedicated. Regardless of industry, these were still core to who I was as a person and as a professional.

The Catherine outside of work persona was a good friend, a bit lazy at housecleaning and sarcastic.

However, still hard-working, driven and dedicated - although sometimes the dishes do stay in the sink a day or two longer than what they should.

In knowing myself and trying to define my own overarching "leadership brand," I had to give thought to my various personas.

Who were my personas that created my leadership brand? What did that mean to the way that I lead and to whom I was in living a leadership lifestyle?

I gave much thought to how do people know professional Catherine vs. personal Catherine?

Was there a difference, or not? So how could I unite my various personas to think about both who I was as a person and why this matters to my leadership brand overall?

Before looking into this more and why you should start thinking about and defining your leadership personas, let's talk brands.

The Brand

Brands in the marketing and communications sense can be fun to talk about.

Thinking about questions like, “Why do we buy what we buy?,” or, “Eat where we eat?” and “Trust the companies we do?” can be an interesting debate and exercise in self-awareness.

Why do we buy paper towel A over paper towel B? Maybe we think A works better than B.

Alternatively, maybe we were also sucked into buying due to the brand name of paper towel A promising better absorbing ability than B, so that's what we buy.

We may not realize that brands and what they promise, like great leaders, can suck us in.

In creating a new brand for a marketing client, the company I was working for was seeking the services of a branding company also in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Some of the questions that these brand experts asked were about what our client's brand story was, what we were trying to accomplish with a new brand and, my favorite, if our brand was a celebrity, who would it be and why?

Branding and personas - oh my! So, what does this have to do with leadership?

When we think about ourselves as leaders and how we want to live and lead, we should complete a similar practice and exercise.

We need to define our personas in thinking about who are we at work, who are we at home and who are we as a person, overall.

In answering, we can begin to create our leadership brand. With that brand, we can further define our mission and our story.

This aligns back with where we started - how do we define leadership and, from that definition, find value when it comes to leadership?

Think of it like similar to how we describe the value of the brands that we buy and trust, how do we want people to explain us and our value as leaders?

We see corporations and organizations completing this exercise to help market and to position their status. We can, and should, do the same.

Creating this profile for ourselves can help us clarify what we want and how we want to lead. This is our foundation for our decisions. This is the basis we need to first create for ourselves in moving forward with the concept of making decisions about being a leader, integrating the APE Model and living a leadership lifestyle.

This also helps us to market ourselves and our leadership, so others perceive our value as leaders.

A leadership brand conveys your identity and distinctiveness as a leader. It communicates your value. It tells your story.

The Story

Now that you are thinking about your personas and your brand let's talk about stories.

When was the last time you read or heard a story? Alternatively, when was the last time you read an organization's "About us" or, "Our story" page or mission statement?

For stories, maybe you recently heard one on NPR. Or, perhaps you watched a TED Talk or had lunch with a co-worker or friend.

For the other three, maybe you are interviewing for a new company and wanted to understand the organization in better detail.

Or, perhaps you read for a school project for research or to understand the importance of these statements.

Two stories come to mind for me when thinking about mission statements specifically.

The first. I once worked with a girl and noticed that she had the mission statement of the company that we worked for printed out and taped right below her computer monitor.

When asked why, she noted that every time she turned her computer on, picked up the phone or answered an email, it would remind her of the bigger picture of why she was doing what she was doing and why it mattered to the organization's brand and mission.

I was impressed. I had never thought about doing that before.

Another place that I worked had a concise mission statement. In staff meetings, the CEO would ask people to recite it on call during the staff meetings.

Everyone had to know it, and everyone had to know it by heart.

When we first began looking at personas and brands, I talked about how Brian Hallagan and Dharmesh Shah founded Hubspot after meeting at MIT.

I also talked about how this story is shared at a marketing conference.

Hubspot organizes that conference annually, and at each event, the two leaders share some story about the company to create a sense of community, to provide updates to their customers as needed about new value adds to the product and to humanize both themselves and the organization as a whole.

Now, on Hubspot's website, the organization further supports the need and value of stories by having a section on their "About us" page, called, "The Story Behind Our Story."

People love stories. I love stories. I'm sure that you probably like stories, too.

Storytelling is not only essential to uniting people in business, manipulating us into trusting certain brands and helping us to connect with others, but also to join us under the leadership of those people who have mastered the art.

Our personas tell us stories about ourselves - who we are at work, who we are at home and who we are overall.

That overall part tells us about our brand. Understanding that brand and are personas also helps us to figure out who we are as people and as leaders.

Having that understanding helps us see our lives in a new light.

In that glow, we can write our own leadership story, or mission, to then use it when communicating our value to others so then they also see us as leaders.

These three elements further strengthen the foundation to which you will make your leadership decisions in using the APE Model.

Ask yourself:

- Who are your personas? At work? At home? Where else?
- What characteristics and attributes unite all of your personas?
- In knowing characteristics and attributes, how would you use these to create and define the value of your leadership brand?
- In thinking about how you defined, understood and analyzed your personas to create your brand, how would you explain your leadership value through story?

You are the only one who can answer these questions in thinking about your leadership and your lifestyle.

This creates your foundation.

Answering will enable you to look historically at your path while also looking ahead to your goals and aspirations and how you want to be perceived.

Later, we'll examine perception is reality and tie these concepts together.

Tying the Three Together

Before moving on to the next chapter, let's take some more time to think about our persons, brands, and stories as each will trickle into understanding the APE Model later on.

As I mentioned, each creates and strengthens the foundation of your leadership brand and how you make decisions moving forward.

In doing this, you can begin to see further what your priorities are and whom you would want to be described as when thinking about your leadership ability.

Now, you can begin to think about how you can use this information to make decisions about how you will continue doing well at leading or how and where you can improve. You may even find that you surprise yourself.

Now, as a word of caution, don't rush through this.

I've sat through plenty of courses where people are asked to complete similar exercises, and they rush through them for the sake of completing a class and then are encouraged to complete on their own at a later time and never do so.

That's your own decision in finding value in, or not, in this type of practice. Some see this type of thing too fluffy.

Maybe you do, but perhaps you don't. Books and exercises and courses and practices and assessments like this are tools.

Let's say someone gave you a hammer, some nails, and some wood and instructed you to make a box.

You should sit there and make the box or not. It's up to you if you use the tools and items given to you to make something with them or not.

Not anyone else. It's your decision.

Share what you find with those around you. That can be intimidating as you may feel concern for what those whom you share this with may say or think about you.

You may have insecurity sneak in and think, "What if this person thinks this is stupid and doesn't see me as a leader?"

Stop that right-thinking way. I know that may be easier said than done, but there's only so much you can do on your own for your development.

Sharing this with people around you can help you to refine what you've written and possibly add some more clarity on what you are already doing and how you can further clarify your goals. Plus, sharing with those around you at work can open the door for more feedback from them on the progress you are making in thinking about the E in the APE Model for evaluation, which we will further outline later on.

We can't assume that just since we take a leadership program, read a book or take a class that
Try this exercise. Really - try it. See what happens.

You could find that having a few ideas and goals relating your leadership brand could be of
assistance in providing you clarity around how and where you could be making decisions about
your leadership ability.