

Culture & Change
by Art Kleiner

Strike Up the Brand

Tom Peters galvanized a free-agent nation with his manifesto, “The Brand Called You.” But there is something missing from his vision: us.

It might seem like forever, but it has been only three-and-a-half years since Tom Peters announced a new strategy for white-collar workers, the “Brand Called You.” Mr. Peters, of course, is the former McKinsey & Company renegade whose best seller, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best-Run Companies*, cowritten with Robert H. Waterman Jr., originated the genre of the modern management book.

“The Brand Called You,” published in the August/September 1997 *Fast Company*, was born, like so many pieces of business punditry, on the lecture circuit, during the apogee of corporate cutbacks. A middle manager in his mid-30s stood up during one of Mr. Peters’s seminars and asked him directly: “Are you some kind of corporate stooge?” The pundit, shaken and irritated, blurted out his authentic reaction from the stage:

Hey, don’t whine to me. Are you s-o-o-o cool, s-o-o-o obviously distinct, that you can survive? Do you have a ‘signature’ that’s as unmistakable in its own right as BMW’s? Or Tiffany’s? Or Nordstrom’s?

In his lectures thereafter, Mr.

Peters focused his attention on ordinary white-collar managers, not the strategic executives whom he had targeted previously. Company loyalty, he argued, was a kind of indentured servitude. He exhorted his audiences to cultivate loyalty only to the quality of their work. “Invent a persona for yourself,” he said. “Make it useful, stick to it, and go where you get the best deals.” Each of us has qualities that, if we buffed them up and pushed them forward, could constitute our own unique selling proposition. Those of us sharp and shrewd enough to play this game well would never have to look for work again; work would look for us. And if we couldn’t make that leap, he argued passionately, we would lose not just our jobs, but our identities and our souls.

Hearing of Mr. Peters’s argument, *Fast Company* editor Alan Webber, himself no slouch at recognizing a concept that resonates with the zeitgeist, invited him to flesh out the slogan. The rest, as Mr. Webber remarked in an e-mail to me recently, “is, um, history.”

Maybe the “brand called you” idea isn’t, um, history. But the idea, amplified in Mr. Peters’s 1999 book, *The Brand You 50*, has resonated with

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a surprisingly large number of people. I hadn't paid much attention to it until two friends — who work for a staid European environmental organization that is trying to loosen its bureaucracy — showed me their cherished, marked-up copy. Since then, I seem to see it everywhere. *The Brand You 50* is an artifact of American hucksterism, replete with glib slogans (“Y-O-U A-R-E Y-O-U-R C-A-L-L-E-N-D-A-R!”) and endless lists of things to do (labeled “T-T-D’s”), bound into a hardcover package about the size of a double pack of index cards. It opens with a paean to some “quintessentially American” avatars of self-reinvention: Dale Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale, Steven Covey, Werner Erhard, and Tony Robbins. It's as if Tom Peters had decided to sell us, for our own good, on the idea of remaking ourselves in his own image; of leaping into the entrepreneurial fray as he did 25 years ago, when he left McKinsey and co-ventured *In Search of Excellence*. And you can't argue that he hasn't thrived since then.

The Peters Brand-Called-You career strategy is particularly persuasive because there don't seem to be any good alternatives. Corporate loyalty *is* dead. Few people think they

can sign on after college with a blue-chip company such as AT&T and stay there until retirement. Internet startups no longer seem like a path to easy millions, or even a steady job. Those who give heart and soul to a company are intensely vulnerable. At any moment, they, like the Amazon.com customer service staff in January 2001, may see their jobs yanked away to India or South Dakota. The Brand-Called-You strategy seems like the only way to beat the system. It builds on the strengths of the current job market without falling prey to its weaknesses.

The only question is: What effect does the presence of this new game have on the complexities of employment in our culture? If it works the way I think it will, then the Brand Called You is, at its heart, a poor way to invest in a career. It's almost structurally guaranteed to pay off for a few early experimenters, while frustrating the rest.

The Human Index

The Brand-Called-You career strategy is not a new idea. Charles Handy described it in 1989; Warren Bennis and Philip Slater before that in 1968; and the poet Ezra Pound nailed it back in 1934 in a book titled *The*

ABC of Reading. “A man's ‘name,’” he wrote, “is his reference. He has, after a time, credit.”

People who live by their wits, like lawyers, doctors, consultants, and writers, have always known the value of managing this personal brand and drawing upon the credit of their reputations. But the Internet has significantly increased the number of people who can live that way. Indeed, if the Web had been deliberately designed to Mr. Peters's specs, it couldn't have been better conceived as a vehicle for the Brand Called You. The reason has a lot to do with the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) that gets typed into browsers. Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the Web's protocols, has called the URL his “most fundamental innovation” because it indexes everything, no matter where it comes from, with the same rigid, standardized addressing schema — “http://www.” and so on — and yet allows for thoroughly unfettered diversity of form and content. The URL system, in short, makes the Internet much more than a communication medium. It makes the Internet an index of all human activity, a way to identify people independent of their physical connections in the “real” world (e.g., to family, to

place, to business, and more).

Already, one can detect quiet but fundamental changes as people adjust to life in a world indexed this way. Suppose, for instance, that I wanted to sell my services as — well, as a management pundit — in the days before the World Wide Web existed. If you wanted to hire me, you would have to look up my phone number or address. Even if I built myself an independent “brand” as a free agent, I would still be tagged to a real-world location: a Vermont farm like Mr. Peters’s, a Boston magazine office like Mr. Webber’s, or somewhere else. That address would automatically identify my location, and people would judge me accordingly (which is why area codes like “212” or “415” become high-status identifiers). I could overcome the rootedness of my address only with some trouble, by setting up a corporate identity, an 800 number, and a P.O. box in a far-away location.

But today, it’s much simpler to set up a frictionless Brand-Called-You-style identity. In fact, it’s automatic when I establish a Web domain. Thereafter, just about every form of communication I use is most easily and cheaply channeled through a brand name (like, for instance, “tompeters.com”). That includes my

phone calls, e-mail, bankbook, resume, photo album, calendars, and, increasingly, my creative work and purchases of goods and services — especially if I have an “always-on” household connection like DSL or cable modem. My children’s Play-Stations connect through this domain; my refrigerator might automatically requisition milk through it. No one communicating with me can tell anything about my location or family identity, unless I put that up online as part of my brand. That doesn’t mean I have much privacy, however, for my Brand-Called-You identity encompasses my work, household activity, and family connections, all continually tracked by the various marketing, data-mining, and searching mechanisms that operate on the Internet.

The Narrow Shelf

Not only does everyone have the ability to become a Brand Called You; it will be harder and harder to avoid it, especially as more Web-savvy appliances are developed. The Internet has placed us all on a common platform, a sort of metaphoric supermarket shelf, where our names stand side by side, ready to be plucked, both as creators and as consumers. (Those two roles will increasingly be blurred.)

Maintaining a personal brand means applying the discipline to your life that Coca-Cola applies to its formula.

As on the supermarket shelf, some brands stand out more than others, of course, but the shelf, paradoxically, is even narrower. In the pre-Internet world, most brands were category-specific. There was no danger of Apple Computer being confused with Apple Records, apple cider, the novelist Max Apple, New York City's Apple Bank, or the Apple Dentist's Group of Houston, Texas. But when business is virtual, detached from the friction of everyday life, there's only room for one business with a claim on the Apple name. The same is true for any name held by a large corporation — or even a prominent individual.

The time is coming soon, I suspect, when an 18-year-old will be given a “coming of age” party in which he or she drops the given family name, and takes on a new unique name, ideally an obscure but memo-

rable one such as “barnsneezer.com” or “glockendroop.com,” that can serve as a unique brand name on the Internet. When these people eventually marry, they and their spouses may face the question: Do we meld our URLs together, or keep our brands separate?

The most enduring battle over Internet governance has focused squarely on this issue of virtual shelf space. The battleground for the dispute is the governing body that controls URL registrations, a quasi-private agency, chartered by the U.S. Department of Commerce, called the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN. Currently, only 10 suffixes — technically known as “global top-level domains,” or gTLDs — are permitted in the central data bank of Internet addresses: .com, .net, .org, .biz, .info, .name, .pro, .aero, .coop,

and .museum. (There are also a few, like .edu, .gov, and .mil, that require special institutional status, along with country suffixes assigned to national governments around the world.)

The reason for the artificial scarcity of suffixes is trademark protection: Whoever controls a popular “.com” suffix, like apple.com or starbucks.com, effectively controls the brand. And most of the influential large trademark-holders want to keep it that way. On the other hand, the Internet's free-for-all hacker constituency argues that dozens, hundreds, even thousands of suffixes should be permitted. ICANN recently rejected more than 150 proposed suffixes, including “.kids” for children's Web sites, “.xxx” for sex businesses, and “.nom” as a suffix for individual Brand-Called-You domains.

Sooner or later, ICANN's stance on scarcity may relax. It will have to, if only under the pressure of hundreds of thousands of Brand-Called-You civilians. The infrastructure of the Web, in short, will not be able to resist its own impact on the marketing of individuals. More and more people will follow Tom Peters's advice, until nothing seems more natural than to establish oneself with a business identity of one's own, and a free-agent relationship with companies, potentially, around the world. And that's when the troubles will begin.

Free Agent Nation

Networks, like most complex systems, do not grow in linear fashion. Sooner or later, they cross some invisible threshold, and the entire structure of the system changes. It's reasonable to think that some such point of inflection is looming, not too far hence, in the post-Internet career culture. After that, the prospects for Brand-Called-You free

agents will change dramatically.

Three years ago, a Los Angeles 16-year-old named Ashley Power began to parlay her considerable resources — wit, bombshell looks, intrepid perseverance, a graphic designer mother, a William Morris agent, and ultimately the help of actor Richard Dreyfuss (whom she met when his niece acted in a streaming-video TV series that Ms. Power produced) — into one of the most popular teenage Web sites on the Internet. She named the site after a cement goose that she tripped over on her parents' lawn. The name, *goosehead.com*, was typical of the breezy informality that she cultivated. Right from the start, she attracted traffic by branding herself, showcasing her own photos and musings. "There are many publications, Web sites, and TV shows trying to cash in on the teen market," she wrote, "but only a teen can relate to a teen."

Ms. Power may still be a teen, and still making her way through high school, but *goosehead.com* is as slickly produced and comprehensive as any commercial Web portal. It has 30 employees, three streaming-video TV series, and a continual flow of complaints from Ms. Power about the effort and time it takes to main-

tain. By creating and commercializing a Brand-Called-You personality for herself, Ashley Power has raised the bar for all teenage Web sites. The *next* Ashley Power who surfaces out of middle school will face some unnaturally tough competition.

The same dynamic will occur for every Brand Called You. A brand, after all, is simply a mass-produced promise, powerful enough that people keep it in mind. The most interesting writers on branding, such as Jean-Noël Kapferer, emphasize that publicizing the brand is the easiest, and least important, part of the marketing process. The hard part is developing a body of product and service that makes the brand worth paying attention to. Maintaining a *personal* brand is particularly arduous; it means applying the same rigorous, locked-in discipline to your life that Coca-Cola applies to its secret formula and bottle shape. In a person, we call this kind of obsessive behavior shameless self-promotion. In a company, we call it good brand management. Either way, it's all-consuming. Perhaps that's why notable Brand-Called-You personalities — Martha Stewart, Oprah Winfrey, Ashley Power, and Tom Peters himself — morph so easily into caricatures of themselves.

For all but the luckiest, there's more power in hooking up with an established brand.

And those are the winners. The losers in a Brand-Called-You world are just as “quintessentially American” as the winners. They're as American as Willy Loman or Philip Marlowe. And the Brand-Called-You strategy will, more likely than not, spawn legions of them. The more the Web entices new free agents to market themselves, the more competition they will all face from each other. Those who dominate their niches early will thrive. For everybody else, the Brand Called You will be a ticket to obscurity.

Most of the major figures who created the Web seem to understand this. There is no marcandreessen.com; only a perfunctory biography page for the inventor of the Web browser on the site of his new venture, Loudcloud. Nor is there a stevecase.com or a jimclark.com. Even Ashley Power is beginning to wonder, out loud, how

much to showcase herself versus goosehead.com as a brand. New Economy people seem to be discovering what conventional businesspeople have always known. For all but a few lucky individuals, there's much more leverage in hooking up with an established brand than in creating one of your own.

This doesn't mean that we will return to a time of 1950s-style organizational conformity. The Brand Called You will remain a viable way to jump-start a career, and to declare independence on occasion. As a free agent myself, I know how wonderful it can be as a way of life. But it's important not to have illusions about it. Being a free agent is not necessarily the best way to thrive, it isn't inherently better or worse, and it will not reshape the workplace in Tom Peters's image. In the years to come, the most successful people will probably be

those who know how to balance loyalty to themselves with a long-term loyalty to the organizations they choose to be part of.

Paradoxically, the more permeable the boundaries of organizations become, and the more the Web makes it easy for people to establish themselves as free-agent self-marketers, the more desirable the “organization person” will probably become — if only because he or she will become more scarce. That could even help end the dominance of the downsizing, exploit-you-and-screw-your-loyalty corporate ethic of recent years, the ethic that provoked Tom Peters into articulating the Brand Called You in the first place. When there are comparatively few people left who really know how to exercise lifelong loyalty to a company, their value will become more obvious. Corporations may finally see that they gain an enormous competitive advantage from cultivating people who are loyal to one company all through their career, who ingrain the company's ways of doing things into themselves — who dedicate themselves, in short, to being part of a greater “brand called we.” +

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