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December 07, 2017

# Why CEOs Need a Strong Personal Brand

CEOs know that their personal brand is part of the public perception of their company. But within their company, their brand is just as important.

[Rodika Tollefson](#)

Freelance writer and journalist



The corporate world is full of iconic examples of a CEO's [personal brand](#) reflecting how the company communicates its values and culture to the world. Business leaders know that their personal brand is a critical part of building the public trust in the company.

Yet many executives don't think about the brand they create within their organization. An internal brand has a different purpose.

"The internal brand is what you try to communicate to your employees, and often, that's an audience many CEOs neglect to communicate to," says David E. Johnson, founder and CEO of [Strategic Vision PR Group](#) in Atlanta, Georgia. "It's about appealing to your employees and making them your stakeholders internally."

## Why You Need a Brand

Steven Drew, CEO of cybersecurity company [InteliSecure](#), which has world headquarters in Denver, Colorado, is not unlike many CEOs. He hasn't consciously contemplated what his brand is and what he's trying to portray to his 200 employees. But instinctively, he's been building an internal brand all along over his 18-year career in executive leadership.

"The brand has to be consistent with your core values as an individual because the foundation of leadership is influence built on trust," he says.

He sees a synergy between the personal brand and [organizational values](#), especially "when you come to forks in the road" and need to make a decision in a sensitive situation.

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# Having a strong personal brand leads to the buy-in of employees, which helps with resilience and helps leaders move through an uncomfortable situation.

—Justin B. Wineburgh, president and CEO, Alkemy X

“The personal brand and organizational values serve as a bit of true north—who we are and what we believe in, and is the path we’re about to take consistent with that set of values,” he says.

Johnson, who works with CEOs to establish their personal brands, says that to employees, the CEO represents the company. The personal brand, then, becomes critical to morale in a crisis because companies may forget about their internal structure and employees.

“That’s when we often see discontent and some of the rumors or media stories coming from sources within a company,” he says.

Justin B. Wineburgh, president and CEO of Philadelphia-based creative media company [Alkemy X](#), has seen first-hand the importance of his personal brand in a crisis. His company, which produces work for companies in media and entertainment, had a significant data hack last year. The breach only affected internal systems, so clients didn’t have to be notified, but some employees’ sensitive information was compromised.

When Wineburgh shared the incident with employees, they expressed their confidence that he was “on it and they didn’t have anything to worry about,” despite the uncertainty of the situation. The incident was resolved quickly and without any damage or lingering consequences.

“Having a strong personal brand leads to the [buy-in of employees](#), which helps with resilience and helps leaders move through an uncomfortable situation. If you have a personal brand that shows people can rely on you, you can work through it,” says Wineburgh.

## Keeping It Authentic

Wineburgh came into the creative media industry after a 16-year career at an international law firm with more than 700 attorneys. As a partner at the firm, he established himself as a “super lawyer” in entertainment and sports law. He says that the way he communicated with the outside world back then was different, but the core values that are part of his brand are the same.

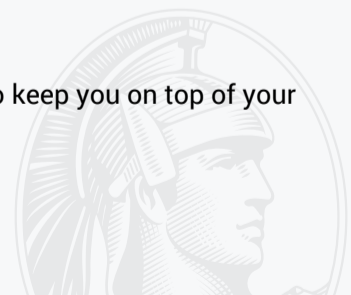
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“I think about a personal brand as communication—communicating to my employees, in a way that’s authentic, to give them a glimpse of who I am,” he says. “They need to buy into the ‘program’ to follow it, so I’m communicating who I am, what makes me tick and why they should buy what I’m selling.”

It wouldn’t take long for employees to see through a contrived persona, especially since inauthenticity leads to inconsistency. Staying authentic means trusting your gut, says Paige Arnof-Fenn, founder and CEO of [Mavens & Moguls](#), a global branding and marketing firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

"If it feels like you're not comfortable or saying things that do not sit well with your or roll off your tongue, then it is time to pause and review," she says. "People know when they are being lied to or sold a bill of goods. Protect your reputation at all costs—it is your biggest asset."

## Communication Matters

The communication strategies that help create a strong internal brand don't come as "one size fits all." For some, social media works well. For others, it's town hall meetings and an open-door policy.

For Chris Lim, founder and CEO of [Climb Real Estate](#) in the San Francisco Bay Area, the strategy was to adopt Slack for internal communication. Lim grew the agency from two people seven years ago to 250 agents at seven offices. He needed a way to scale communication as the brokerage grew and email became unproductive.

"I started by identifying what sets me apart from the competition and how that translates to customer value proposition," he says. "Technology innovation is part of my brand, so we've used technology to have our conversations."

Drew says personal branding takes not only self-reflection but also a trusted network to give him the "hard truth" and help reconcile who he is or wants to be with how others perceive him. This network includes people from inside and outside the company. Inside the organization, that means he has to be open to criticism personally.

"The CEO has to create that trust culture and trust relationships, especially at the leadership level, to be able to call each other out with no agenda," he says. "Otherwise you create blind spots."

Executives who hesitate to embrace the idea of being a brand should consider this: Just like in marketing, people will fill in the blanks.

"If you do not define your brand, others will do it for you," Arnof-Fenn says. "You should control your message and image as much as possible."

Photo: Getty Images

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### About the Author



**Rodika Tollefson**

Freelance writer and journalist

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