

# Personal Branding Lessons Every Professional Needs

by Merilee Kern, MBA

In the business world, there are those who create policy, set up infrastructure and generally make the rules everyone else follows - except for those who happen to be the rule breakers. These are the individuals who say what they think, mean what they say and march to the beat of their own drum. Both of these personal styles can certainly garner attention and get things done, however, there are personal branding lessons both types can benefit from. I recently connected with Karen Leland, an internationally-regarded brand strategist and author of the newly released title, "The Brand Mapping Strategy: Design, Build, and Accelerate Your Brand," for some insight. She conveyed that branding successes, challenges and resulting lessons for rule makers and rule breakers can be tied to six specific areas as they pertain to us all. According to Leland's predictive Brand Mapping Matrix, the success of any brand—in business or otherwise—boils down to how the brand performs across these six key dimensions.



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Each of Leland's dimensions is detailed below, including exactly how both personal styles fared therein as well as the correlated personal brand takeaways, to help other enterprising professionals achieve in kind.

### Develop Your Brand by Design, Not Default.

Know precisely where you are so you can discern where you need to go.

#### Rule Breaker:

In the 1980s, the infamous character Gordon Gecko from the movie, Wall Street was the epitome of the rule breaker. He wasn't afraid to call it like he saw it, no matter what anyone else thought. Even today, there's a fascination with those who position themselves as anti-establishment and proudly go against the grain. As a general strategy, this has the potential to allow professionals to get away with more than the typical business leader normally would.

#### Rule Maker:

These are the qualified professionals with a solid track record and plenty of experience implementing tried and true policies. However, while a proven history of success is important, this type of traditional style has the risk of being seen as stodgy or lacking innovation. This type of management style has the challenge of incorporating new ideas for continued growth and success.

### Personal Brand Takeaway:

Every business person, from secretary to CEO, needs to start by assessing the personal brand they currently have and be truthful about the degree to which it exists by design—or default. Then they need to take stock of the impact that current brand is having. Is your brand producing the reputation you desire? Is it creating the environment and responses you are looking for? If not, a pivot to a more powerful personal brand may be needed.

### Anchor Statement.

What is the go-to description of who you are and what you do? This is sometimes referred to as an elevator pitch.

#### Rule Maker:

A terrific example of an effective anchor statement comes from Michelle Seiler-Tucker, M&A Advisor: "I specialise in selling businesses and represent more than 10 000 buyers looking to acquire a company. On average, we obtain a 20% to 40% higher selling price than what the business first appraises for." It's specific and to the point.

#### Rule Breaker:

Steve Jobs has been noted for a wide variety of memorable statements. When describing his company he said, "What is Apple, after all? Apple is about people who think 'outside the box,' people who want to use computers to help them change the world, to help them create things that make a difference, and not just to get a job done." While not strictly an anchor statement, it certainly underscores Jobs' and Apple's overall philosophy.

### Personal Brand Takeaway:

All business people need to be able to present their brand in less than a minute. For example: When at a cocktail party you are asked the standard, "What do you do?" can you answer in a few short sentences that pique the listener's interest? If not, your anchor statement needs some work. In addition, it's important to pay attention to how your anchor statement is resonating and landing with your desired audience.

### Unique Branding Proposition.

What is it about what you do, or how you do it, that makes you unique, distinct and special? What sets you apart?

#### Rule Maker:

Brands that capitalise on being the best product or service in their industry can and certainly do build brand loyalty and enjoy success - as long as they can deliver on their claims of superiority.



**Rule Breaker:**

The rule breakers understand that now more than ever, how you do what you do is just as important, if not more so, than simply being the best at what you do. Finding new and better ways of doing things is critical to continued growth and success.

**Personal Brand Takeaway:**

Positioning yourself by specifically articulating how your brand speaks to the needs of your audience, and the unique way you address those needs, is critical to creating an effective personal brand. And the more specific you can be, the better.

**Brand Tone and Temperament.**

What is the consistent mood, tenor, quality, character and manner you bring to all your interactions?

**Rule Maker:**

Successful keynote speakers know how to engage with their audiences, hold their attention and leave them with something of value. Following the traditional standards of speech writing and delivery will hold speakers in good stead. However, a speech that is simply good may be effective in the moment but the chances of that speech having an impact over any length of time are fairly low.

**Rule Breaker:**

There's a reason TED talks are so popular. TED talks are given by impassioned, industry leaders who are not simply giving a speech - they are telling stories, giving a performance, leaving it all out on the stage. Their topic, whatever it is, may be broad but the delivery is uniquely them. Their TED talk is powerful because they are the only person on the planet who can give it.

**Personal Brand Takeaway:**

What you say has power, but the way you say it—your tone—has just as much impact. Every businessperson needs to be aware of how their brand tone is coming across (online and off) and adjust where necessary. In addition, taking any tone to an extreme will always backfire: Too serious or too snarky both harm a brand in the long run.

**Signature Story.**

Why do you do what you do? What's the essential story that brought you to this place?

**Rule Breaker:**

Being a rebel or a maverick can seem cool but doing so to the point of alienating those around you is counterproductive. Part of being a successful rule breaker is

knowing which rules to break and when. No one is an island and it's important to be able to nurture the key relationships and partnerships you'll need to help your business thrive.

**Rule Maker:**

Gone are the days where a company's CEO is a nameless, faceless entity unknown by consumers. People want to know the who and the why behind the what.

**Personal Brand Takeaway:**

Never underestimate the power of a good story. A strong (and truthful) narrative about where you came from and what has influenced you to do the work you now do can connect you with your customers, employees and colleagues at a deeper level. Your brand needs to be more than a single sound bite or pithy elevator pitch. Otherwise, you run the risk of damaging your brand when things don't go exactly as you planned. The best brands feature multiple, complementary messages that weave together to form an accessibly complex and in-depth communication.

**Signature Services.**

What are your core competencies?

**Rule Maker:**

Having an MBA or other formal degree and education is undoubtedly extremely helpful. The knowledge and connections made are invaluable.

**Rule Breaker:**

However, there have always been those who have the creativity, passion, intelligence and work ethic required to get a successful business off the ground - no formal education required. Having specific core competencies - whether those come from education or experience - is what's important.

**Personal Brand Takeaway:**

Know exactly what your brand brings to the table and how it stacks up against your competitors, and craft a powerful way to talk about it that inspires confidence in others. The fulcrum of your brand needs to rest on the material ingredients of your values and commitments.

A standout style (be it brash or competent) is a plus, but it will only take you so far. At some point going beyond taking a stand for what you believe in and specifically letting people know how you plan to get there will become a central issue. Think about one area where your personal brand is being expressed more in talk than displayed in action and focus on aligning the two. □