

## Some CEOs Advertise The 'Me' Brand— With Limited Success

COMPANIES BUDGET large amounts of money to develop brands that stir excitement and cement loyalty from customers. "Fly the Friendly Skies" still evokes United Airlines and an era of hassle-free travel. The "snap, crackle, pop" of Kellogg's Rice Krispies brand conjures up for many consumers an image of a cereal that's fun for kids.

Now, some top executives are branding themselves as distinctly as they brand their companies' products. They want to ensure their names also are quickly recognized and tied to a particular sentiment. They believe they have to do this to retain the support of increasingly fickle directors and investors. A strong public image may also help them build alliances with government officials and business leaders across the globe. And in the Google age, they want their names to be more prominent than those of their rank-and-file employees, who are competing for high placement on search engines and social-networking sites.



By Carol  
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Building a personal brand gives the executives fame beyond their companies. Numerous retired CEOs, from GE's Jack Welch to Citigroup's Sandy Weill, are on speaking and publishing tours making sure their names remain in bright lights.

Some of the most successful entrepreneurs have demonstrated the benefits of linking a strong name and personality to their unique products. Martha Stewart, founder of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, has turned her name into one of the most successful brands in business. It is on her bedroom sheets, dishes and other household products; her magazine; her television show; and, most recently, her architectural designs of new homes. Ms. Stewart's 2004 conviction for lying to prosecutors over a stock sale, followed by a five-month prison stay, hasn't damaged her image as a maven of trendy and tasteful living.

OPRAH WINFREY has used her name to build a powerful brand that emphasizes self-empowerment, reinvention and spirituality—themes that she has said are at the center of her life and that she highlights on her TV talk show, Web sites, magazine and other ventures.

Virgin Group founder Richard Branson portrays himself in his own books and in media interviews as an unorthodox pathfinder and a daredevil who has escaped death by shipwreck, gunfire and balloon crash. He uses this image to snag deals and realize novel ideas across a broad spectrum of industries represented by the 200 companies he operates. His

customers can fly Virgin Atlantic, take balloon rides and buy mobile-phone service, life insurance, bridal gowns and pop music.

Yet, corporate executives should be wary of too much personal brand-building. Unlike entrepreneurs who boost their companies when they promote themselves, an executive at an established corporation who brands himself is competing with his company's image. Such executives risk quashing the spirit of teamwork essential to innovation and productivity, and they tend to fail to do vital succession planning.

A high-profile CEO can make sense for a company that "is seeking a stronger identity in the financial markets," says Gurnek Bains, chief executive of YSC, a London-based corporate-psychology consultant. "But all our research shows that it's humbler executives with less ego—the ones who stay very connected to their employees and customers—who get the best results for their businesses."

Tom Kuczarski, a consultant on business innovation and a professor at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, adds: "When you're the rock-star brand at the top, you're conveying to people in the ranks that they're second-class citizens—and you stop thinking about how to develop the next group of people who will run the show."

AT TOYOTA, President Katsuaki Watanabe isn't a household name. Unlike some of his counterparts at other auto makers, such as DaimlerChrysler Chairman Dieter Zetsche, Mr. Watanabe likes to keep a low profile and has never appeared in his company's ads. Yet, consumers have made Toyota the most profitable car maker in the world. The company is expected to sell some 9.34 million vehicles this year.

Other successful CEOs forgo developing a personal brand to focus on building bench strength in leadership. Procter & Gamble's A.G. Lafley, following a company tradition, assigns new M.B.A. hires to be brand managers for products such as Tide detergent and Clairol hair-care items. The work stresses the importance of knowing everything possible about customers' buying habits.

Mr. Lafley teaches by example. On his own business travels around the world, he quietly talks with customers in supermarkets and even, sometimes, their homes, asking them which products they like and use most frequently.

Most corporate chiefs know success doesn't rest on one charismatic leader. Companies such as Intel, PepsiCo, Goldman Sachs and General Electric also are known for developing leaders up and down their ranks.

Only the most confident CEOs are willing to advertise their employees more than themselves.

Monday, July 16, 2007