

What Martha Could Learn from David

Enough ink has been expended detailing the rise and fall of Martha Stewart to create an elaborate dinner party place card for every man, woman and child in America. What was once hailed as the quintessential 'personality-driven' brand is now, say the pundits, the victim of the personality in the driver's seat. As Martha goes, so goes her empire. And it looks as if Martha might be going down.

Reliance on an individual personality has always been a risky brand proposition whether that individual is a founder, a charismatic leader or a spokesperson. Human beings are, after all, fallible and fallibility is not a trait highly prized in the corridors of power or the hearts of investors. We like our companies and our brands reliably stable, unwaveringly predictable, ruthlessly consistent - attributes that the best of mortals have a difficult time achieving and maintaining throughout a lifetime.

A story widely known among Ogilvy & Mather employees involves David Ogilvy in one of the last new business pitches of his career. Apparently, Ogilvy was competing against Leo Burnett and Young and Rubicam, the two other formidable founder-driven agencies of the time. As a final question, the client asked David to state one reason why he, the client, should place his trust in Ogilvy & Mather rather than the other two agencies. David replied, "Because, sir, Leo Burnett and Raymond Rubicam are both dead. And I am still alive."

This got a good laugh at the time, but fortunately for his agency, David didn't actually subscribe to this notion. In fact he devoted vast resources, time and energy to making sure that Ogilvy the brand would be relevant, vital and robust after he no longer was.

David Ogilvy understood, virtually from the day he opened his eponymous agency, that the greatest possible immortality would be achieved if his company cast a larger shadow than he did. From the beginning, and throughout his career, he enthusiastically codified his every intuition and personal belief in the form of rules and pronouncements. His various manifestos were published in books, office pamphlets and employee manuals. This became the stuff of the Ogilvy 'bible' which determined everything from what kind of client the company would choose to what kind of employee it would hire.

By the time Ogilvy finally retired to his Chateau in Toufou, France, his agency was so imbued with Ogilvy-ness his actual presence was largely immaterial.

What can Martha Stewart and other 'personality-centric' brands learn from his example? First and foremost, true brand leadership requires that the vision extend beyond any one individual's reflection in the mirror. The 'essence' of this iconic personality must be consciously and continuously injected into the nucleus of the brand. This process should be formal and deliberate; no brand becomes clearly and compellingly defined through casual hallway conversation or simply by way of a leader leading by example.

Dedication to strategic initiatives and discipline is necessary for a brand to stay true to a defined way of being (David Ogilvy called it, "The Ogilvy Way."). Rigorous employee training and carefully crafted systems of evaluation and reward create the kind of human emissaries needed to perpetuate the brand personality.

Years ago, when I was a Creative Director at Ogilvy & Mather, David, then long retired, made an offhand comment to me that revealed how well he understood the critical distinction between himself and the brand he built. "You know it's funny," he said, "this place is so good now that if I interviewed here as a the writer I was, I'd never be hired today." He seemed neither sad nor ashamed by this realization. In fact, he seemed proud.

There's a lesson in here for Martha and every other formidable personality who seeks to create a brand empire by trading on the power of their name. People are mortal. But by ensuring that your company is imbued with your values and personality your brand might live on long after you retire, expire, or leave the courtroom in handcuffs.