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## **Cows Aren't Always Cows.**

By Anthony D. Paustian, Ph.D.

***“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.”***

- Oscar Wilde

### **An Image Perception Story**

Back in my early days of college, I worked as an assistant manager in a 24-hour grocery store. Being the lowest link on the managerial food chain, I was given the joyous responsibility to oversee the ever-popular 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. timeslot (a shift which allowed me the opportunity to observe some incredibly interesting, sometimes disturbing people). During these hours, customer traffic is typically slow, so we used the time to clean, stock and face merchandise, build product displays, and sometimes just goof off.

One of my last responsibilities each morning was to check in the daily milk delivery. One day for whatever reason, it dawned on me that ALL of our milk, regardless of brand, came off of the same truck. Please understand that at the time I wasn't privy to the more than 100 thousand dollars I have since spent on higher education and didn't yet fully understand the concepts of private labeling and multi-branding. At the time, though, I thought it was a brilliant and astute observation.

Our store carried three distinct “brands” of milk: Borden® (the primary national brand with “Elsie the Cow” as its mascot), Parade® (our store brand), and generic (boring white label with black text only). All of these brands came in a variety of flavors and types including whole, 2%, 1% and skim.

Since it seemed unusual at the time that the same truck would deliver all of our milk, I felt compelled to ask the driver if he had to make several separate dairy stops in order to get it all. His response actually surprised me. “No,” he said, “they all come from the same dairy; cows are cows.”

He was right. There were no such things as Borden® cows (although “Elsie” made a strong visual case for it), Parade® cows, or “generic” cows. The delivery driver went on to explain that the same exact milk is in each container; only the labels were different.

Cows are cows, and milk is milk.

I then went on a mission (or a crusade if you will). I tried to actually “help” people by pointing out there was really no difference between the three brands. (My bosses didn’t mind since we actually made higher margins on the cheaper milk anyway.) I distinctly remember a particular instance when I tried to explain this to an elderly lady who appeared to be on a fixed budget (remember what happens when you “ass-u-me”). When I saw her reach for the Borden® milk, I quickly, but politely, suggested there was absolutely no difference between the brands and that she could actually save money by purchasing the generic instead. I received a look I will never forget, one that suggested I was a combination of ignorant, stupid, and naïve, at best. She then proceeded to inform me that she had been drinking milk for about four times as long as I had been alive and that I should basically mind my own business.

This was my first real lesson in branding and image: ***Perceptions of reality are more important than reality itself, and it is perceptions that drive people and behavior.***

Despite having the exact same content, the packaging of the products created perceptions that were subsequently extended to the content itself. Elsie was a cartoon cow that had a very sweet and soft feminine voice in the Borden® commercials. The consumer couldn’t help but like Elsie, and her support of Borden® milk added value to the product related to the perception of quality. It didn’t matter that she was a cartoon. In the mind of the consumer she represented the ideals of being pure and wholesome. The Parade® brand was only as good as the consumer’s views of the store itself. As long as the consumer trusted the store, the consumer more than likely trusted its store-labeled products (although not to the same degree as beloved Elsie). As for the “generic” brand with its simple black text on a plain white background: despite no difference in product quality, why would anyone trust this product when given the choice? How good could it really be when no one was willing to put their name on it?

However, regardless of someone’s current perception, it only takes one event, one issue, or one bad accusation to totally change how something is viewed. What if you found out (or even if someone simply made the accusation) that the cows that produced a particular brand’s milk were being drugged, abused or painfully electro-shocked in order to produce higher quantities of milk? I doubt any cartoon cow in the world would be able to overcome that. What if it was reported that one of the store-labeled cans of beans had a dead mouse in it? Even if the store-labeled milk came from a completely different supplier than the beans, I’ll put down a Vegas bet that this would affect most

people's view of all of the store-branded products. And as for the "generic," enough said.

Image is a lot like trust. You spend a lifetime building it and all it takes is one negative moment to tear down a lifetime's worth of effort. This is also true when it comes to your personal image. It's not just milk producers or even cola and shoe companies that have to be concerned about image. Whether you are a business professional, politician, athlete, parent, student, or just someone trying to get by and make ends meet, your personal image is more important now than ever before. It can change in an instant, often before you even know it. I realize that the concept of "personal image" may seem somewhat cheesy or unseemly to some people. But unlike past generations, where news traveled slowly and reputation was often formed by direct interactions with a few relatively local people, technology has changed all that. The sheer speed and ease by which information is disseminated has become a game-changer.

Because people now tend to live at least part, if not most of their lives online through Facebook®, LinkedIn®, MySpace®, Twitter®, Flickr®, YouTube®, blogs, and a variety of other sites (including some, like my personal website, which may even seem "old-fashioned" by young audiences), a huge amount of online content has been created and shared, with or without your permission. This content will tell people more about you than ever before; who you are, what you do, and why you matter. Whether you like it or not, this image is being formed by the daily interactions you have with almost anyone, regardless of how formal the relationship. Although reputation historically developed over time, it can now be shaped immediately, and search engines (like Google®) have made it nearly impossible to "hide" from anything, good or bad. In today's world, your personal image is the most important asset you own, and it will directly affect both how people perceive you and your success in most aspects of your life, whether their perception is shaped by your relationships with others, your job, or even your credit score. Leaders of all types and at all levels must have a positive personal image to effectively influence others. If you take personal leadership seriously, then you must do the same when it comes to your personal image.

## **So How is Image Created?**

Others' perception of you is influenced by what they think about you, including how they look at you, how they feel when doing it, what they see, how they mentally categorize you in terms of others, and how (or if) they personally identify with you. In essence, your image (despite what you personally may believe it to be) is closely aligned to your reputation, which is interpreted by a variety of different people whose moods, perspectives, perceptions, attitudes, values, and feelings vary between them.

Although a great many "brand experts" will state that you can proactively create your personal image and how people "see" you, I personally believe that ultimately you are who you are, regardless of how you may present yourself to others. Although you may

be able to fake being “someone else” for a little while, others will soon see through your charade, especially with the advent of rapidly changing technologies. Your personal image today is now closely tied with your personal identity and ultimately all things you. No one can really hide from technology today, so it’s actually in your best interest to be transparent and authentic. (In other words, be who you are and stop trying to be someone else.)

In the movie *The Devil Wears Prada*, Miranda Priestly, the harsh fashion “devil” in the movie played by Meryl Streep, makes an enlightening statement as she attempts to educate her new underling about the “stuff” of fashion:

“This...stuff? Oh. Okay. I see. You think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select...I don't know...that lumpy blue sweater, for instance because you're trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don't know is that that sweater is not just blue, it's not turquoise. It's not lapis. It's actually cerulean. And you're also blithely unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves Saint Laurent...wasn't it who showed cerulean military jackets? I think we need a jacket here. And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of eight different designers. And then it filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic Casual Corner where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room from a pile of stuff.”<sup>1</sup>

In a world driven by psychological shaping through the power of what “they” say (“they” being the product brands, celebrities, athletes, media, and just about anyone else who attempts to influence us today), the importance of being genuine has never been greater.

## **Meet Your Digital Personality (Sounds so *Matrix*-like)**

Through ever-improving search engines, our lives can no longer be separated into distinct categories such as personal and professional. Your life is now seen by others to be one large clump of all things you, a holistic “digital personality” so to speak, and everyone has one (on the flipside, not showing up in web searches also says something about you). As a result, everything in your life now ultimately affects everything else which can and will directly affect your future.

Since your digital personality represents all things online related to you, something as simple and innocent as a post to someone’s blog, a post on Facebook®, or an uploaded photo or YouTube® video (or being “tagged” by someone else) can have permanent consequences. For example, as a college professor, I know of at least two specific cases in which straight “A” students were denied jobs because of some questionable aspects of their digital personalities. Unlike generations past, the choices we make today have a

tendency to stick with us, possibly forever. At the rapidly growing rate of “online spread” (a term I use to describe the exponential spread of content and information through online reposting and tagging), even a few negative words about you (true or otherwise) can have disastrous effects.

This cultural shift in information transmission is also not a “generational thing” only relegated to young people. Although many areas of the Internet are still dominated by the “millennial” generation, older generations (Gen Xers and Boomers) have made huge gains. According to the PEW Research Center and their “Internet & American Life Project,” the fastest growth in social network sites has come from older Internet users. Blogging has shown greater gains with the older generations, and older users are more likely to engage simultaneously in several different online activities (such as research, reading the news, visiting social sites, responding to email, and watching videos).<sup>2</sup> Even an “old-school” capitalist like Warren Buffet, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, knows the importance of image and reputation. Buffet was quoted in a *New York Times* article in regards to the dismissal of David Sokol (once seen as his potential successor), “We can afford to lose money—even a lot of money. But we can’t afford to lose reputation—even a shred of reputation.”<sup>3</sup> If Warren Buffet is willing to lose substantial money rather than a shred of reputation, what does that say about the importance of personal image?

That is why now, more than ever before, part of personal leadership is doing what you can to take control of your digital personality and reputation. If you don’t at least attempt to take control of it, others will do it for you, and you may not like the result.

Take the 2009 media frenzy that surrounded Tiger Woods, the first billionaire athlete many believed to have the perfect personal image since he turned professional in 1996. That image, crafted through his competitive golf game, the media, rapid online spread, endorsements, and positive word-of-mouth, came crashing down in an instant, and he and his game have never been the same since. His image was more than just golf. It was also based heavily on his character, and his behavior away from the game of golf has directly impacted that part of his image (to what extent is still unclear).<sup>4</sup>

Toyota, a company founded in 1950, slowly built its market-leading image in automobile manufacturing based on strong perceptions of quality, safety and excellent design. In the wake of major quality defects that have been linked to a number of fatalities, these perceptions were seriously questioned in 2010 during the largest recall in the history of automobile manufacturing, and the unstable perception of Toyota’s finances (once a darling on Wall Street). Combined with production problems created by the 2011 Japanese tsunami and the subsequent nuclear reactor meltdown in Japan, Toyota still struggles to regain the same image perception it once had.<sup>5,6</sup> According to the J.D. Power and Associates Initial Quality Study, Toyota’s brand quality perception dropped from sixth overall (top amongst mass-market producers) to 21<sup>st</sup> out of 33 brands.<sup>7</sup> The online spread of media stories and discussion boards related to the company’s issues has only served to accelerate this change in perception.

Building image and trust is a fragile process done daily, not in a day. Every act, experience, visual and situation, however minor, impacts people's perception of how one's image is defined. Your image lives in the hearts and minds of everyone that comes in contact with you either directly or indirectly. Just as "Elsie" adds value to the Borden® image by creating a personal connection with the consumer, the generic brand provides nothing to help create that connection, thereby adding to its long-term "risk" factor. Regardless of the context, people want to be able to comfortably connect with you and trust what you offer.

The longer an image is proactively built, the more likely it will be able to overcome periodic setbacks in perception, which can't be avoided (for example, a perception based on a false statement or accusation made by another). A daily, concerted effort to build an image focused on every detail and personal interaction will help most individuals or organizations overcome these setbacks.

## How to Build Your Personal Image

As you develop and define your sense of excellence in personal leadership, there are a number of online (and some offline) things that can be done to directly influence others' perception. It's never too late to start (and if you haven't, now would be a good time):

1. **Decide how you want people to perceive you**, see you, and generally feel about you. What characteristics make you unique? Where do you excel? Whatever you decide, it must be authentic and truly "you," or others will quickly see you as a fraud. I can't think of a person in this world with a better personal image and reputation than my father. One would be hard-pressed to find anyone who would have a negative thing to say about him. This image has been built over the span of his entire life, and he has served as a role model for me for all of mine. However, I am not my father. I can only be me, and any attempt to replicate his image and/or reputation would be seen as something I'm not. That's not to say that he hasn't influenced me because he has, and much of what I am today I owe directly to him. But my personal image has to be mine. It has to represent who I truly am or wish to become, not what I am not or unable to be. Getting there is a process, and everything you do must be part of that.
2. **Create an online home (such as a website)** that exhibits and provides evidence of your desired image. Remember that the quality of this site directly impacts the quality of your image (something that Starbucks®, Pottery Barn®, and the Apple® Store realized a long time ago). Provide relevant, value-added information, and most importantly, make sure it's accurate. Factual, grammatical and spelling errors are all killers to a personal image. Your online home doesn't have to be business-related. It can be about your interests, hobbies, or activities. It just has to be about you.

3. **Create profiles on social media sites** (such as Facebook® and LinkedIn®) that support your desired image. These profiles and the information posted should be BOTH professionally personal and authentic. Post only information, photos and/or video that support your desired image, versus that which you think are “cool” or “funny” and may actually cause long-term harm to your image. (Think “Rated G” and suitable for all audiences.) Also since others can see them, be careful who you “friend” on these sites. You can become “guilty by association” by linking yourself to people with poor reputations or undesirable content. There are no prizes for having the most friends. Choose them wisely and regularly monitor their posts in order to be certain that those associated with you online are still supportive of your desired image.
4. **Regularly communicate your image throughout the web** on your Facebook® or LinkedIn® sites, post comments to blogs or discussion forums, review books or other relevant media, and ask for feedback, recommendations, testimonials, or comments related to your content (the latter builds credibility, but be careful what you ask for). It’s about quality and not quantity. Don’t allow random posts to your sites and only enable comments to specific uploads or posts. Respond to negative comments and initiate a conversation regarding them (keeping it positive and civil).
5. **From a business professional prospective, create original content** that supports your online image through blogging, writing newsletters and articles, and adding supportive contributions through posts to others’ work that is in line with your own desired image. Through your life experience you probably know more than you realize. In the offline world, write a book, volunteer your time, lecture or speak to classes and/or people at all levels, and join community-based and professional organizations. It also goes without saying that some “old-school” aspects of image building also still apply, such as your style of dress and conduct (personal behavior is still the biggest driver of personal image).
6. **Always monitor!** Stay on top of your social sites and what your “friends” are doing. What does Google® say about you? Check regularly and make sure that what’s being presented is accurate and respond to false and negative stuff in a positive, professional manner. Make sure that the content or sites that you have some control over are near or at the top of a search of your name (utilize one or more of many known search engine optimization techniques available such as the use of “hidden” or invisible keywords throughout your site). Set-up Google® Alerts to notify you when your name comes up on the web (over two-thirds of all web searches are conducted through Google®<sup>8</sup>). Seek ongoing feedback from those you trust to ensure that what you are communicating is being perceived as intended.

## **Building an Organizational Image**

From an organizational perspective, the creation of image requires all people, regardless of responsibility, to be properly trained and made aware of how their daily actions ultimately effect perception. They must take control of their personal image as well because markets and consumers today want to know the various “faces” of the organization. Employees at all levels can no longer “hide” behind the company facade, and people expect them to be front and center. The obvious aspects of organizational image building can’t be ignored. Product and service quality must be maintained and improved to ensure at least a stable if not growing market share. Physical assets, buildings and grounds must be kept immaculate. And basically, the entire customer experience must be regularly evaluated and updated to reflect changes in customer needs and wants.

People often ask me how to create and maintain a competitive advantage in organizational image today in an environment marked by rapid changes in technology, fluid delivery systems, global competition, real-time communication through the Internet, and instant (and often brutal) customer “experience” reports through social media sites. Although I do think it’s becoming ever more difficult to maintain an advantage, I have a solution.

### **The Golden Answer**

A day doesn’t go by that I don’t hear about someone bemoaning a poor customer service experience. In fact, I believe customer service has gotten so bad that some people seem to just expect it. We, as customers, have collectively lowered our bar so much that we have become ever more tolerant of being treated poorly. So here’s my “golden” competitive advantage answer for building your organizational (or personal) image: Regardless of rapidly changing market conditions, advances in technology, or whatever else people struggle with to stay current, you don’t need to create or invent the next greatest thing to stay ahead of the competition. Simply build a total culture of above-and-beyond service, and this will immediately place you ahead of most, if not all, of the competition.

It begins with personal leadership. You become successful by helping others get what they want. Your attitude matters most when dealing with people. Your attitude sells. Go beyond the Golden Rule. In other words, treat people BETTER than you would want to be treated. As a kid, my father regularly told me that if you borrow something from someone, always return it in better condition than when you initially received it. Then they will always be willing to help you again if you need it. When people come to you for what you provide, they are investing their time (and possibly some of their money). Give them back something of greater value. If people believe you truly care and are all about taking care of them first and foremost, they will give you their business, even if

your products and services don't have all of the latest bells and whistles. Bottom line: Regardless of anything else, people's perception of an experience still comes down to how they feel.

I have developed something of an obsession with Mont Blanc® pens and products. Although there are many other really good pens and leather products out there (even some with better features), I've become loyal not only to Mont Blanc®, but also to one particular boutique. I've purchased merchandise at a number of different Mont Blanc® boutiques across the country, but only one truly stands out, the store in Oak Brook, Chicago (this store has since been consolidated into the downtown Chicago store). Not only did my service representative there take care of my wants (this really doesn't classify as a needs purchase), she went way above and beyond EVERY TIME. Each time I made a purchase, she would send me a very nice, handwritten note in beautiful calligraphy thanking me for my purchase. She sent me cards on special days like birthdays and Christmas and often for no particular reason but just to say that she hoped all was going well with me, all in the same striking penmanship. She quickly resolved any purchase issues and often tossed in free "extras," such as pen and pad refills. She took the time to make me feel special and show that my commitment of money was worth it. No other person at any other store (Mont Blanc® or otherwise) had invested this much time into my personal satisfaction. As a result, she had my permanent loyalty. She obviously cared about her personal image, and after receiving the news that she was going to be "downsized," she even took the time to inform me of the closing and personally connected me with my new Chicago-based representative. Now that is service and personal leadership. Given the chance, she is the kind of person I would hire in an instant.

People value most how you make them feel. They will ultimately act based on those feelings. So give them something worth their investment of time and money. If you make them feel special, they will reward you with their long-term loyalty. By proactively building a personal image of service to others, you will create a sustainable competitive advantage in image, despite whatever other label you may have been given.

So I guess the delivery driver was wrong. What's on the outside needs to match what's on the inside. Cows aren't always cows after all.

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