



CURT KAMPMEIER CMC
EDITOR

How to Establish a Unique Brand in the Consulting Profession: Powerful Techniques for the Successful Practitioner

Alan Weiss (*Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, San Francisco; 2002; ISBN 0-7879-5513-2*) \$39.95

REVIEWED BY DAVID BUSHKO

There is an old story about a church that hired a preacher. When the preacher delivered his first sermon, the congregation thought it was a good one and was pleased they had hired him. The second Sunday, the minister preached the same sermon. Well, it was pretty good, and, though it was a bit out of the ordinary to hear the same sermon two weeks in a row, the congregation generally was glad to have the review. The third Sunday, the minister preached the same sermon again. Now, the congregation was getting a bit restless and feeling that enough of a good thing was enough. When the minister preached the same sermon the fourth Sunday, one of the deacons approached him and said, "Reverend, that's a fine sermon, but you've preached it four weeks in a row." "Yes," replied the clergyman, "and I'm going to continue preaching it until you get it right."

I thought of this story while reading this book by Alan Weiss. He has been preaching the same "Cast-thy-bread-of-value-upon-the-client-waters-and-reap-the-profits" sermon for a number of years. Weiss is a smart guy who pours a lot of good thought into his books. The result is sound theory and expert practice. Best of all, it works, so there's no reason for him to stop preaching his gospel until we've all got it right.

Not incidentally, Weiss's message applies to more than just consultants. Those in other service firms and professions, and those in small- to medium-sized businesses, can all benefit from Weiss's message. In other words, we don't need to hesitate to use Weiss's wisdom to create value for our clients. I don't.

The sermon in this book focuses specifically on branding and opens with some solid arguments for consultants to get on the brandwagon. "Brands create an attraction to a particular source of products or services, and that attraction is often so strong that normal discrimination, skepticism, and price sensitivity are subordinated." As a result, both attracting and retaining clients is easier. Cost of sales goes down. Furthermore, a well-defined brand provides a clear guidance system to help all of us run our businesses

more cost-effectively.

There is a negative reason for branding that's equally persuasive. "Just as in life, in which failure is the default position . . . a negative image or brand will usually be the default position." That is, if we don't take charge of our brand, our customers will. And since criticism comes easier to most people than praise or acceptance, they are more likely to define our brand negatively than positively. Better, therefore, to define it for them.

From there, Weiss leads us through the branding process, from analyzing our current position, to identifying our appropriate positioning, to planning our brand communications tactics.

As good as his explanations and examples are, Weiss's real strength is that he doesn't just tell us what to do, he actually does everything for us but the thinking that only we can do. He does it with lists. Weiss is the List Meister. Everything he tells us to do is accompanied by a list of sorts. In this space, I can give only a few examples. It seems appropriate to list them.

1. What is the current state of our brand? There's a listing exercise to help figure that out. We have to do the listing, but Weiss tells us what the list should include.

2. What should our brand attributes be? Weiss gives us a list of helpful questions with explanations for figuring this out.
3. How can we get a book published? Weiss provides a checklist for “Creating a Great Proposal,” with ample explanation for each item.
4. How can we do well on the lecture circuit? Follow Weiss’s list of “quick methods to establish a speech even if we’ve never professionally spoken before.” And before we go to our engagement, we need to review Weiss’s checklist of “Speaker Marketing Support Musts.”
5. How can we make our brand irresistibly attractive? Weiss calls this attraction “Marketing Gravity.” To build it, just follow Weiss’s list of simple rules for gravity elements.

But this isn’t a book simply about how to live our branding life righteously. Weiss also alerts us to the temptations that might distract us from the true way. He does this with a list of 12 branding myths—as he puts it, “a dozen types of advice you can ignore immediately.”

■ *Myth #1:* A tight intellectual argument is sufficient. According to Weiss, this is wrong because “logic makes people think and emotion makes them act.” You’ve got to have both.

■ *Myth #2:* You must analyze the environment for need. The problem with this approach is that it puts too much emphasis on “what is,” and too little on “what if.” Weiss notes that powerful brands often create a new need rather than simply satisfy a current one. When creating brands, he advises us to consider “how they’ll appear in a year’s time and how flexible they are to changing times.”

■ *Myth #3:* Clever catch-phrases and adages are sufficient. Not if they aren’t compelling to the buyer at some personal level. Therefore, while it is true that prospects act on emotion, the emotion has to relate to a real, perceived need. “There has to be a ‘connection’ for brand appeals to work, even on the emotional level.” Catchphrases and adages that don’t make this connection don’t work.

■ *Myth #4:* Brands are developed over a long period of time. This used to be true, but in the electronic age of instant brands, such as Amazon.com, PalmPilot, and Virgin Airlines, brand-building can occur much more rapidly.

■ *Myth #5:* Brands must be honed for specifically defined targets. In today’s world, traditional demographic groups such as “white, middle-aged, females” come in less easily identifiable slices. Now, there are lifelong learners, second-career retirees, and so on. As a result, we need brands with wide appeal, so all possible groups can evaluate the use of our services. Or as Weiss puts it, “Cast a wide net, not a single hook.”

■ *Myth #6:* Advertising is the be-all and end-all in branding. Weiss doesn’t think too highly of advertising as a brand-building tool. “Most advertising—in any form—is nearly worthless, because it tends to focus incorrectly on what you do rather than on what the buyer receives. It is task- and input-oriented rather than result- and output-oriented.” In his mind, we need to shift our efforts to public relations. “Consultants interested in branding must ‘influence the influencers,’ meaning that it’s often far more effective—exponential, in fact—to pursue editors, reporters, pundits, interviewers, alliance partners, trade association heads, and allied professionals (attorneys or CPAs),

who in turn influence your potential buyers.”

■ *Myth #7:* You can brand only a tangible product. This is no longer true in our knowledge/information economy. For consultants especially, the ideas, methods, and approaches we use in various services and projects have branding potential that shouldn’t be overlooked. Weiss advises us to “think about branding ideas that are not reliant on a workshop delivery method, a rigid six-step template or a clever matrix. Moreover, consider the ultimate transcendental brand, which has the most enduring nature of all in changing times: You.”

■ *Myth #8:* Brands require active, aggressive management. A brand shouldn’t divert our attention from our true purpose—obtaining business and delivering high-quality results. “It is not and should not be a separate end requiring high levels of attention and investment.”

■ *Myth #9:* Brands need to be specific and focused. Yes, but these are relative terms. How specific and how focused is up to us. If I say I’m a doctor, that’s more focused than saying I’m a member of the medical profession. And brain surgeon is more focused than doctor. We need to decide how (by specialty, by region) and how narrowly (for example, strategy, operations strategy, beverage operations strategy) we want to define ourselves. Weiss’s advice is “to create brands with the broadest possible appeal for your expertise and your passion, while still creating a ‘perimeter’ within which to focus.”

■ *Myth #10:* Brands must continually grow toward universal recognition. True for CocaCola, McDonald’s, or some other multinational, but not for most consultants. In our case, what’s important is “to achieve brand recognition

in those market segments that are important for current and future business.”

■ *Myth #11:* The brand is external to the customer. This myth certainly didn't originate with anyone who knows anything about brands. If our brand doesn't exist within our customers' minds, if they haven't embraced it with loyalty, it doesn't exist at all. As Weiss notes, “It's important to allow your customers to participate in the brand . . . Business doesn't exist without clients, and neither do brands. The greatest acceleration you can provide is to allow your clients to participate.”

■ *Myth #12:* Brands in and of themselves have little value without substance. I've never known anyone to espouse brands without substance, and Weiss is no exception. What he counsels, here, however, is that we take time to consider how our brands might be perpetuated beyond our own association with them. As examples, he cites authors such as Tom Clancy who have loaned their names to books actually written by others. This is an element of brand strategy that individuals and small firms in particular need to weigh carefully, and Weiss's discussion is a good starting point.

Overall, this book is Weiss mentoring us between hard covers. He explains what we need to do, tells us how to do it, and then gives us the tools we need to go out and do it right. For consultants, I don't know a more useful branding book.

David Bushko (dbushko@firstthink.biz) is president of FirsThink, a corporate and marketing communications-consulting firm that helps clients address branding, positioning, and other marketing and internal communications issues. He also handles a wide range of copy and speechwriting assignments.