



The Former CEO of Ogilvy & Mather on Personal Branding

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Shelly Lazarus has been building brands at Ogilvy & Mather for more than 40 years. When she joined the agency in 1971, she was one of few women in the advertising field. Twenty-six years later, having steered successful branding efforts for clients such as IBM, Ford, American Express and Unilever, she was named its Chairman and CEO. What does this business trailblazer, Advertising Hall-of-Famer and current Board member of Merck, G.E. and Blackstone recommend to people who want to build their own brand? I recently sat down with Lazarus and an audience of senior professional women, to discuss personal, rather than corporate, marketing advice. In this condensed and edited interview, Lazarus shares her thoughts on what “brand” really means in a career context, and why simply being yourself may be the best strategy of all—for women or for men.

What can a personal brand do for your career, and what’s the best way to start building one?

Here’s the thing: I *hate* it when people talk about personal brand. Those words imply that people need to adopt identities that are artificial and plastic and packaged, when what actually works is authenticity. One of the fabulous things I’ve enjoyed about my career is collaborating with so many leaders across different industries and countries, and without exception the successful ones have been comfortable in their own skin. Resilience—the ability to hang in there when things are difficult—is critical in a career, and if you’re spending every hour of the day pretending to be someone you’re not, you’ll be exhausted and won’t have the energy needed to face your real work. On the flip side, if you’re genuinely excited about what you’re doing, and have that light in your eyes, it will attract other people to you, and motivate them.

How does the recommendation to “be yourself” hold true if you’re not certain you’ll be effective?

Expressing a point of view is always legitimate, and if you're doing it because you're genuinely passionate about a topic, I don't think anyone will have a problem with that. If you're valuable to the organization and advocate strongly for an idea, what's the worst that can happen? Even if the project doesn't move forward, you're not going to get fired.

What you do need to pay attention to, however, is style—not just *what* you say, but *how* you say it. People tell me I smile a lot—but I'm strong. I express very clear and forceful opinions, but I try to do it nicely. You don't have to be mean to be powerful, and you can do anything with charm.

How would you advise people who are nervous about putting themselves out there and making mistakes?

Early on in my career I was in my boss's office and the media planner came in to his office and she starts literally running in circles. That's not just a metaphor. She was going around like that because we were supposed to present the media plan to a big client and the computer was down. My boss gets in front of her, grabs her by her shoulders and shakes her and says, "Karen, what do you think they're going to do to you? Take away your children?" Regardless of the situation, if you're really valuable and you do a great job, you're not going to get fired. Somebody's not going to think your idea is smart? So what? You won't forget it for weeks, but they'll forget it five minutes later. Take a chance. Just speak your mind. There's no bad outcome.

Does a personal brand have to change as you become more senior in your company?

There's a common misperception that you have to take on a new persona when you enter the leadership ranks: to become more restrained, intellectual, cerebral. But that doesn't do anything for you. Brands exist in the hearts and minds of the people who use them, and if you suddenly try to switch them—which I've seen many corporations try to do—you alienate the customer. Whatever humility or generosity or warmth made me successful early in my career when talking to a brand-manager level client, I tried to keep when we were both promoted and sitting in corner offices.

When you think about people with strong personal brands, who comes to mind?

David Ogilvy, the founder of our agency, was one of the world's great salesmen, and completely outrageous. He wore kilts to work. Once we were at a client dinner and he ordered five of those little jam jars you get with hotel breakfasts, plus a spoon. If you can't be brilliant, he said, at least be memorable. Trust me: If you met David, you remembered.

What advice do you have for today's aspiring leaders about being memorable within their own organizations?

Pick your words carefully—and say what you really mean. David had principles by which he led Ogilvy, and unlike with so many corporate mission statements, his are impossible to forget. Whereas other companies might say, “Politicians don’t do well here,” David said, “We abhor toadies.” Other leaders might tell their employees to respect the product’s end user; according to him, “the consumer isn’t a moron; she’s your wife.” Every so often during my tenure leading Ogilvy these hot stuff young copywriters would want to overhaul the principles, and inevitably they came back with a version that together we’d rip right up, because it had lost all of its passion and uniqueness and fervor. When you’re leading people towards something important, losing your authentic voice is the *last* thing you want to do.

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