

# Your Virtual Brand

*It's the sterling silver cord.*



by **Deborah Dumaine, Catherine Mullally, and Brian Penry**

**M**OST OF THE TALK ON DEVELOPING A personal leadership brand focuses on live interaction—how you present yourself in face-to-face situations, where people see or hear you. But in our global world, your interactions are increasingly remote. And you lead more in three ways: by writing, in virtual meetings, and through the Internet. You may be an outstanding face-to-face leader; now you need to define your brand in the virtual workspace.

You can take charge of how you speak, write, and represent yourself to increase your impact.

## You Are Your Word

Today, people are often led and inspired by leaders whom they never meet. Much of your leadership is done through writing, including e-mail. As you write, you're leading—making decisions, managing, guiding, collaborating, giving feedback. As you motivate and inspire, you're creating your brand. Here are three ways to improve your leadership brand in writing.

**1. Motivate your audience by considering their needs.** Analyze your readers' needs, and include only the information they need. Drive action by answering three key questions: Why am I writing this? What main message do I want readers to remember? What do I want readers to do?

**2. Sound a call to action.** Clearly say what you need readers to do. Include action steps, timeframes, and request for action. Add headlines—and make them specific. Instead of "Rationale," try "Rationale: to avoid potential liability." Include "Action requested," "Next steps," and "Suggested deadline." The key message should always go at the beginning and include a *so what?* statement. Clearly explaining your purpose in writing will motivate your readers, drive the action you want, and position you as a sure-footed decision-maker with a dynamic brand image.

**3. Cultivate a style that matches your virtual brand.** Express compassion and support. Avoid judgmental terms or corrective feedback—save that for live or phone meetings. Your readers should also be able to identify your style by the look of your communications. *Style* includes word choice, sentence and paragraph length and structure, and use of headlines. Keep your audience in mind. Use a simpler style for your in-house communications. Keep paragraphs to six lines and sentence length to 28 words. Use frequent and informative headlines. Match your style to your brand—formal or informal, friendly or all about business. All styles should be inspirational and drive action. Whatever your brand, you should always convey the message that you are approachable and easy to do business with.

Conveying your brand through writing that is easy to understand and implement simplifies decision-making and drives action—leading to success.

## Speak Your Brand

Conference calls and virtual meetings save time and travel costs; however, meeting over the airwaves imposes new rules. Gone are the nuanced elements of facial expression, eye contact, and body language. It's all about the voice, language, and skill in delivering an effective message. Here are five ways you can make a strong impact:

**1. Understand your audience.** Whether you're speaking to one person or a large group, take stock of their needs. How much info do they already know? How much do they really need?

**2. Deliver a clear message.** Keep the message accessible with simple and conversational language, strong and active verbs, shorter sentences, and a minimum of "biz speak." Keep the team's needs and agenda in mind. Don't interrupt or talk over other speakers.

**3. Watch volume, inflection, and cadence.** During a conference call, it's easy for participants to tune out since they're not visually engaged. Your voice is your amplification device. A low voice implies lack of confidence,

while high volume may be considered overbearing. Appropriate inflection or musical range in the voice, as well as enthusiasm, keeps listeners interested. Cadence is the pacing. Done well, it draws the listener into your story.

**4. Be mindful of tone.** Aligning tone of voice with the meaning of your message imbues it with power and authenticity. The groundswell under Barack Obama can largely be attributed to the quality and tone of his oratory—what's said and how it's delivered.

**5. Listen!** Listening is a primary leadership skill. Engaged listening enlightens and shifts the speaker from an "I-centric" style to a collaborative style focused on listeners' needs.

You can lead, and deliver your brand through *what* you say and *how* you say it.

## Your Virtual Brand Online

In the online landscape, branding takes on three additional dimensions:

**1. Control online content.** You demonstrate leadership by being number one—literally. When you Google yourself, are the top search results your own content? Less flattering images and words can

be trumped by posting better ones and influencing traffic.

**2. Unleash the power of online video.** Through Web portals like YouTube, online video is a great virtual-branding option. Another aspect of online video is Webcam conferencing. Each online telecommunication is a window into your leadership brand—and it demands thoughtful presentation.

**3. Manage your brand.** Communicate your leadership brand online in various ways, from a full Web site to a simple Web page or a Web log (blog): an ongoing forum for your positions and the feedback of others. Craft *your* brand to your advantage, combining graphic design, key words and themes, and listings on networking sites. Successful virtual brand management means controlling what others *can and cannot* see.

Whether writing, speaking, or representing your brand virtually, be true to your authentic self. Maintain the delicate balance that enables your sense of self and style to thrive while serving the interests of constituents. Then your culture and personal brand become one. LE

Deborah Dumaine is author of *Write to the Top* (Random House). Visit [www.better.com](http://www.better.com). Catherine Mullally is President of the CMC Group. Email [catherine@cmc-group.biz](mailto:catherine@cmc-group.biz). Brian Penry is Principal of Penry Creative. Email [bpenry@penrycreative.com](mailto:bpenry@penrycreative.com).

**ACTION:** *Manage your virtual brand.*