

CEOs need to be the faces of the brands they represent

Issued by [UCT Graduate School of Business](#)

21 Jun 2018

Having a leader with a strong personal brand is becoming a must-have for business today - but their brand must also be aligned with the values of the organisation, or both may suffer.



Branding no longer focuses on humanising products. It primarily looks to influence people through other people they know, like and trust. And, according to personal branding consultant and marketing scholar Dr Talaya Waller, this means that CEOs and board members have to step out from behind the boardroom door and into the public eye.

Speaking at the UCT Graduate School of Business on Monday, Dr Waller said that CEOs and other business leaders need to be seen and heard by their public and are integral to the brand image of the companies they run. The ways people think about branding and corporate influence has changed to focus on people creating and sharing human experiences, she explained.

“The future of branding is personal,” she said. “CEOs have become the face of the company; the face of the company is no longer the logo. If you look up most global 500 companies, most likely you will find the CEOs have more followers on social media than the company itself.

“Ninety-two per cent of consumers trust a recommendation from a person over a company when they buy a product or a service; the average person who posts a brand message on social media gets 561% more engagement than when that same brand message is posted on social media by a company.”

It stands to reason then that business leaders need to take ownership of their personal brand and strategically, effectively and consistently manage the perception of their value.

“What people are looking for is a CEO who is likeable and relatable. A good CEO can attract media attention, bring in more investors and the best talent to the organisation. For instance, people still want to work for Apple because of Steve Jobs, even though he is not around anymore, that is how great his brand was,” said Waller.

But having a strong CEO brand is not sufficient, according to local brand reputation management consultant and columnist Solly Moeng, who shared the podium with Waller at the GSB. Moeng cautioned that there is a balance that needs to be struck between the brand of the CEO and the brand of the business for optimal results. A strong CEO brand can lift a company, but a weak company brand can drag the personal brand of its CEO down, he said, adding that the appointment

of Wiseman Nkuhlu as the new chairman at KPMG this January was a case in point.

Nkuhlu's personal integrity and impeccable credentials as a veteran public servant and former head of the Development Bank of Southern Africa must have been a defining criterion for his appointment, said Moeng. He provides KPMG with an opportunity to leverage his reputation to rebuild a brand in tatters following its alleged role in state capture and its reported cover up of the theft of billions of rands from Randgold Holdings & Exploration.

But Nkuhlu is not unaware of the risks involved, having stated in an interview with the *Sunday Times* that if KPMG is merely using his appointment to appease stakeholders and stem the tide of the loss of clients, they have made a mistake. He made it clear to them that he valued his reputation, as that is all he had, and that there was no way he could be compromised. That is why he insisted on a full mandate to ensure that KPMG follows through with its commitment to full disclosure and cooperation in the various investigations underway. In other words, to align the organisation's brand to his own.

Moeng said that the strong personal brand of Cyril Ramaphosa is similarly at risk of being corroded by an ANC that is struggling to deliver on its mandate of a better life for all and is widely perceived to be corrupt to the core, unless he can turn that organisation around.

For branding to reach its full potential then in any company or organisation, it is imperative that personal and corporate brands are aligned. While leveraging each creates new opportunities for both, managing the tension between them is a key challenge for marketers and CEOs alike.

*Moeng and Waller were guest speakers at a public lecture on **Merging Perspectives: The Personal & Corporate Brand** hosted by the UCT Graduate School of Business. Regular events at the GSB bring high profile voices together to have quality conversations with the wider public, sparking new ideas and fresh ways of thinking about the most important drivers in business and society. For further information and to see details of upcoming lectures, visit <http://www.gsb.uct.ac.za/events>*

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