

BALANCING





A strong personal brand can open doors to new and exciting opportunities. But if it doesn't align with your employer's brand, it could also slam them shut.

By Matt Alderton

Who you are has a lot to do with how you design. And building a strong personal brand can help tell that story.

But designers take heed: As you craft your reputation's narrative, it can't be a completely selfish endeavor. You must also be an ambassador for your company's brand. The two must complement, not conflict.

"Someone once told me, 'You can design whatever you want, but please don't embarrass me,'" says Jaime Velez, FIIDA, director of interior design, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, London, England. "At the end of the day, I'm not representing myself; I'm representing the company I work for."



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Designers must take a holistic approach to branding that encompasses not only themselves but also their employer.

"One of my 10 commandments of personal branding is making sure you're aligned with your corporate brand," says brand coach Terry Whitaker of Terry Whitaker Unlimited, a brand leadership and culture consultancy, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. "If you're not, clients are going to get mixed messages. That creates chaos, and chaos will make everyone unhappy. It's a really delicate balance."

Where Two Brands Converge

Whether it's intentional or not, you convey a brand message to everyone you meet. It is a composite of all the things people associate with you: a particular design style at which you excel (e.g., contemporary); a specific vertical in which you specialize (e.g., healthcare); a personality trait you exude (e.g., genial); a way of working for which you're known (e.g., collaborative); or even a signature aspect of your appearance (e.g., a fluorescent bow tie). All of that communicates to clients and employers who you are and what value you bring.

"Your personal brand is your reputation," Whitaker says. "When you want to leave people feeling a specific way about you, that's what it means to be focused on your personal brand."

By being strategic about everything from what projects you work on to what you post on social media, you can mold how that brand takes shape. And that's where harmonizing with your company's brand comes into play.

"You have to ask yourself: What does the firm really believe in?" Whitaker explains. "If the company's values match up with your values, your brands are much more likely to align."



At Steve Leung Designers Ltd., Hong Kong, China, founder Steve Leung's "East-meets-West" design philosophy—minimalist, contemporary, functional—is a major driver of the company's brand, says Chief Creative Officer Chong Chiu Fung.

"My personal brand is 90 percent aligned with the company brand," Chong says. "I'm a very straightforward person who likes keeping things short and sweet, [and] Steve is a very logical, rational kind of person. We share a similar vision, which helps me oversee creative development across the company and ensure a consistent design standard."

Katie Hauser, IIDA, NCIDQ, LEED AP, also sees the alignment of her values and the values of her employer—modular carpeting company Interface—as an asset. "[At Interface] we strive to approach every project and every client with the most personal touch," says Hauser, who is based in Akron, Ohio, USA. "This is me, or certainly what I strive to be each and every day. I thrive on having personal connections and trust with my clients and want them to know how valued they are to me."

For both Hauser and Interface, personal is professional. "Ray Anderson, our founder, encouraged everyone to brighten the corner where they are," Hauser explains. "I absolutely want to emulate Ray's wise and simple words of brightening the corner of the world where I am."

Because Hauser's values match up with the values of Interface, her efforts to represent her company naturally advance her own brand. "I would like to think that my personal brand reflects who I am: a hard-working, genuine person who is able to find the humor in situations and uses this as a connection point to others," Hauser says. "In turn, I have approached my design career as I would any other situation in life: listening and identifying the challenge, providing high-quality work that meets the client's needs, and striving to make a genuine connection while doing so."

Be an Asset

In addition to *values*, a good way to ensure brand alignment is to focus on *value*. "When the designer is able to add to the company's overarching organizational brand and design in such a way that it enhances what the company already stands for, it's a beautiful union," says Shelley Crooks, principal at Palladian West, a professional recruiting firm based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.

Whitaker agrees: "Even if you think you're the best designer your company has ever had, alignment is all about being a team player. If your firm has a great brand, you should ask yourself how you could make it even better. That kind of approach is good for both of you."

SOM's Velez is an example of someone who's doing it right. Born in Colombia and trained in the United States, he's designed interiors in 14 different countries, which he's leveraged into a personal brand that he describes as "global instead of local."

"When I'm working with clients or meeting with vendors, I can bring up examples of things I've seen, attitudes I've perceived, or strategies I have that have been defined somewhere outside the local market," he says. "That builds an aura around me that attracts people."

That's of tremendous benefit to SOM, according to Velez, because the firm relies heavily on its global scale and diverse talent pool. "I have become, to a degree, an ambassador of the message that the firm wants to deliver to the business community, which helps SOM compete for clients," he says. "We don't have one principal who is leading the charge; SOM is a firm of multiple voices, and that has really shaped who I am and what I bring to the firm."



Chong Chiu Fung

Authenticity Always Wins

Sonal Kotecha also brings a diverse perspective to the corporate brand of Pallavi Dean

Interiors in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, where she is a senior interior designer.

"The company was founded and headed up by a female entrepreneur, which is a very empowering aspect of the company brand," Kotecha explains. "It's a primarily female office, and we all take ownership of the projects we are

working on. There is no hiding behind a senior because the structure is transparent, and this is even translated into the space we work inside, which is in an entirely open-plan format. We all know what everyone is working on at any given time and encourage internal critiquing of our own work so that we can ensure our clients are getting the best solution possible."

Because its brand celebrates collaborative design, diverse opinions and experiences are important to PDI. Kotecha tells that story via her personal brand in a way that maximizes her contribution by emphasizing the unique perspective she can share with her colleagues.

"In a word, [my personal brand is] diversity," says Kotecha, a second-generation Indian who was born and raised in the United Kingdom, has Kenyan-born parents and now lives in the Middle East. Her design career has included stints in a variety of sectors, including retail, commercial, and residential design. "This variety is my identity," she says.

Designers who don't see themselves in a firm's brand probably shouldn't join that firm in the first place, says Kotecha. "I don't think you should step into an organization where you feel you need to reconcile your brand identity," she says. "It's more important to be authentic."

And while some designers might worry that their company's brand will overshadow theirs, Chong says that needn't be the case. "The [company] brand is the skeleton," he says, "but you can add your own personal touches on top of that framework." ■



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KILL IT ON LINKEDIN

Let's be honest, when compared with its social media counterparts, LinkedIn's vibe is pretty boring. But when it comes to supporting your personal brand, the power of the networking site can't be ignored.

"LinkedIn is the most widely used tool in the B2B community," says Terry Whitaker, Terry Whitaker Unlimited. "Designers absolutely should be using it to take charge of their brand."

But the full force of LinkedIn won't be realized

unless you take advantage of all it has to offer. Here are four tips for getting started:

1 Use keywords: LinkedIn isn't just a social network; it's also a search engine. In your headline and introduction, use the right keywords. Instead of your title, for example—project manager, partner, or associate—Whitaker recommends using descriptive terms like "hotel designer" that highlight your expertise.

2 Stay active: If you want to position yourself as a thought leader, participate. Share professional status updates, link to industry articles and blog posts you've authored, seek recommendations and endorsements, and participate in relevant LinkedIn groups, suggests Whitaker. And she's quick to emphasize participating over broadcasting. That means not only posting your own updates but also responding and reacting to others.

3 Try Pulse: Want to be a super user? Write an original article in your area of expertise and self-publish it on LinkedIn's Pulse platform to reach LinkedIn users who are interested in the topic.

4 Share your work: LinkedIn allows you to publish a digital portfolio of publications and projects. Use your profile to share not only images of your work but also to reveal the stories behind it.