

2018-05-01

Managing the risk in human brands

Susan Fournier, Giana Eckhardt. 2018. "Managing the Risk in Human Brands." GfK Marketing Intelligence Review, Volume 10, Issue 1, pp. 30 - 33. <https://doi.org/10.2478/gfkmir-2018-0005>
<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/40183>

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Managing the Human in Human Brands

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KEYWORDS

Human Brands, Risk

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Human brands: powerful and risky /// Human brands such as Calvin Klein and David Beckham – brands that are people as well as productized brands for sale in the marketplace – are at once hugely powerful as well as highly risky. They are powerful because human brands convey a level of authenticity and potent cultural meaning that non-human brands cannot match. This grants the resonance, differentiation and personal connections required for brands to thrive in today's commoditized world. But human brands are risk-laden because people present increased chances for undesirable events such as illness or misconduct, and these reputational challenges can diminish returns. How can managers harness the power of human brands while reducing the risk associated with them?

To answer this question, we leverage a medieval legal theory developed by History Professor Kantorowicz some decades ago to explain how a king can be both a mortal human and a legal entity that lives on across time (see Box 1).

{Box 1}

THE KING'S TWO BODIES: A "BODY NATURAL" AND A "BODY POLITIC" MAKE HUMAN BRANDS DIFFERENT

How can a King be both a mortal human ("the body natural") as well as a legal entity which will live on in the form of another person when the current king dies ("the body politic," or public, when we talk about brands). A key insight from this theory is that the two bodies are inextricably interwoven and can never be separated; their competing interests work at odds and need to be managed simultaneously. The two-bodied framework highlights what makes human brands different from other brands: It is their very humanness – the physical and social realities, mental biases and limitations of being human – that introduces risk while generating the ability for enhanced returns. Four tenets of the body natural can create imbalance or inconsistency across the brand's two bodies: mortality, hubris, unpredictability and social embeddedness (see Figure 1). None of these qualities manifest in traditional non-human brands and all of them present risks requiring active managerial attention. Rather than treating humans as brands and making humans into brands for sale in the commercial marketplace, our framework forces a focus on the deeply human qualities of the human brand.

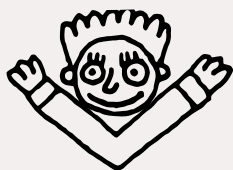
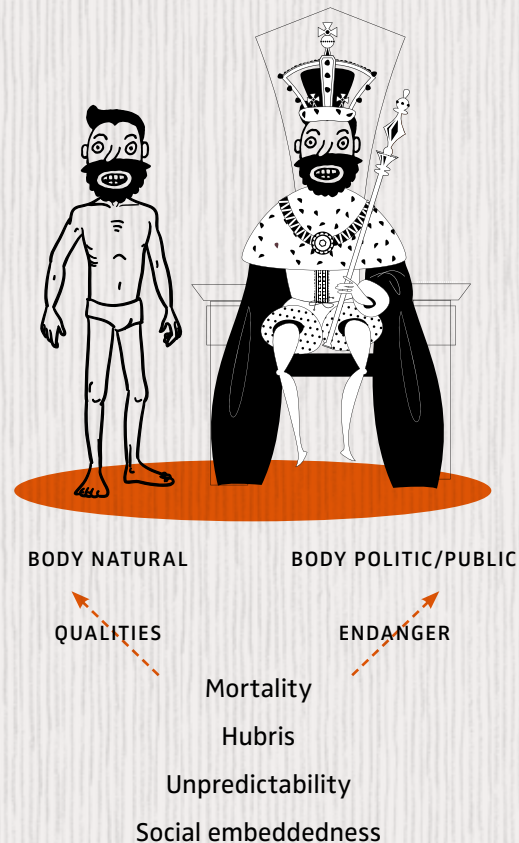
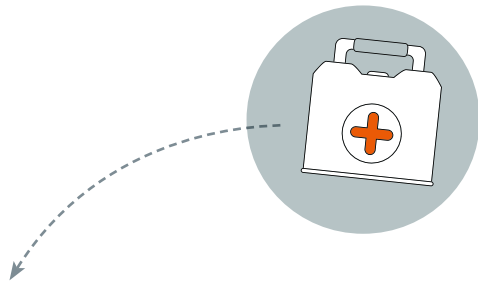


FIGURE 1:
 The body natural and body public and their role in human branding

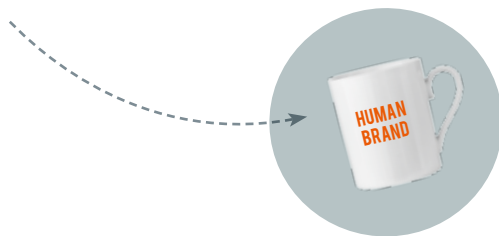




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The risks a body natural imposes on the brand

Mortality /// The first characteristic of the body natural is perhaps the most obvious: The body natural is mortal, and this means that one day the person in the human brand will die. Typically, companies seek to separate the body natural from the body public. This strategy is encouraged in a stock market that demands an endgame wherein the brand is not dependent on the person for its vitality. In the case of the Mar-

tha Stewart human brand, to prepare for her eventual death, managers tried to distance Stewart the person from Stewart the brand. This strategy was not successful: The body natural provides the primary source of meaning and cannot be excised without diminishing human brand value.

Hubris /// A sense of infallibility is another quintessential human quality that introduces risk to human brands. Some charge that Hillary Clinton lost the election because hubris clouded her ability to understand her status among voters; the media criticizes President Donald Trump daily for hubris that impedes effective decision-making. Hubris privileges the body natural over the body public, putting the human brand system out of balance and at risk.

Unpredictability /// Human brands are also risky because of the unpredictability of human nature. Managers of traditional brands are taught to carefully control the marketing mix in order to convey a consistent message over time, but it is part and parcel of human nature to not be “on brand” at all times. The body natural inadvertently leaks meanings every day and these meanings do not always align with the brand’s positioning. Indeed, this very quality lends authenticity in a powerful way that non-human brands can never match. As President Trump’s press secretary knows too well, balancing the authenticity derived from being unpredictable with the risk of being inconsistent is hard to get right.

Socially-embedded /// Human brands are socially-embedded – they live within complex webs of families, friends and colleagues – and these relationships introduce unintended risks to the human brand. A large part of the cultural meaning of a human brand stems from what others reveal about the brand to the public. This lends intimacy to the consumer-brand connection, as consumers feel they know the “real” person behind the brand, not the managed image. But, brand managers do not have control over what connected others will reveal. In Martha Stewart’s case, testimonies of family members and subordinates exposed a person starkly at odds with the brand image of domesticity and perfection. Ivanka Trump’s fashion brand suffers at the hand of her connections to her father.

How to handle risk and deploy the power of human brands /// Proper management of the sources of risk in the human brand requires attention to two guiding principles: consistency and balance between the two bodies of the brand.

- > **Find the right balance** /// Mortality and hubris can lead to an imbalance, where one body is privileged over the other. To reduce this risk, governance structures, succession plans and the public relations toolkit can be judiciously applied to ensure that the body public, in the case of mortality risk, or the body natural, in the case of hubris, does not dominate.
- > **Ensure Consistency** /// Unpredictability and social embeddedness can lead to inconsistency between the two bodies – when the person does one thing and the brand says another – and righting this relationship is a core task of human brand managers. Inconsistency can have positive effects on perceived intimacy and authenticity of the human brand, but only if the magnitude of distance between the body natural and body public is not too great and if implicated meanings are not central to brand positioning. Managers should avoid brand platforms that contradict human nature or unrealistically constrain the body natural.
- > **Monitor consistency and balance permanently** /// With human brand management, active stewardship of the body natural is an ongoing process, not just something to be engaged during times of brand crisis. Brand tracking systems can be designed for this, with metrics including the risk of hidden meanings in the body natural, difference between claimed and revealed meanings in the brand's two bodies, and the valence of dominant personality traits of the body natural. Monitoring press coverage, social relations and public positions held by the body natural will help keep human brands on track.

In conclusion, the two-bodied system is a novel framework that uncovers the sources of risk in human brands and highlights strategies to unleash their power.

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FURTHER READING

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