YOU'RE BRANDED (LIKE IT OR NOT)

John Hancock Financial Services CEO David D'Alessandro says you're building a rep — a personal brand — at work with every little move. Take charge of construction, and you can build a better career.

Interview by Chris Warren. Photograph by Jason Grow.

David D'Alessandro has spent his whole career thinking about brands. What makes them durable, or ready to shatter at the first sign of trouble? Think Coke versus, say, DeLorean.

You could say many corporate execs do the same kind of thinking these days, when "brand" has come to mean "holy grail" in the business world. But D'Alessandro, 53, is actually qualified to spout opinions: As Chairman and CEO of John Hancock Financial Services, he steered the company onto *The New York Times*' list of the top 100 brands of the 20th century. Even before making his way into the executive suite, D'Alessandro was brand-minded; he took the advertising-and-marketing path up the corporate ladder.

Through all this work in communications — and now as a corporate chief — D'Alessandro has come to believe that what a consumer thinks immediately after hearing a company's name determines whether that company succeeds. In his 2001 bestselling book, *Brand Warfare*, D'Alessandro laid out his advice for companies looking to shape and burnish their brands.

Now D'Alessandro is applying that brand savvy to people. His contention? Just as company names call forth an image in consumers' minds, your name triggers a mental image in every person you work with. And just as with companies, that image goes a long way toward determining your career success.

D'Alessandro draws on his expertise in shaping company brands and his personal experience navigating to the CEO's chair in his book, *Career Warfare* (McGraw-Hill, 2004), available in paperback in February. In it, he describes how your personal brand is built and how seeing yourself as a brand that needs to be developed and marketed can create opportunities that equally skilled and talented people might never see.

To describe D'Alessandro's own personal brand, you'd certainly use words like *blunt* and *bold*. In 2003 alone, he threatened to pull John Hancock's multimillion-dollar sponsorship of the United States Olympic Committee unless it revealed how it spent its budget and, just for good measure, was one of the first Boston business leaders to call for the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law, former head of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. *American Way* spoke with D'Alessandro about everything from the importance of a personal brand to why corporate scandals aren't about greed.

The corporate world and organizational life in general don't come across terribly well in your book. Do you have a dim view of the internal dynamics of most big companies?

I'm very cynical toward organizational life, whether it's in universities or the government or corporations or big nonprofits. They are not the most efficient career-makers. They don't exactly end up with the very best [people] in the very best jobs all the time.

What does that mean for people who are working in organizations?

My point in the book was that if organizations are relatively inefficient, and you are talented, you need to find ways to be seen and heard in order to rise. How many people do we know who went to school, were smarter than we were, who ended up in worse jobs? A lot.

Can you explain what a personal brand is and how building one is similar to how companies build their brands?

[A] personal brand, just as with corporations, is your reputation: the reputation of your product, [the] reputation of yourself. People pay less attention to their personal brands because they believe other people are going to take care of it for them. And they don't realize that every day — with every action, every inaction — they are building a reputation for themselves, aka brand, that other people will use to help them or hurt them.

Let me give you an example of why it helps [to have a good brand] that's very similar in both corporate life and for personal branding. When a person who is perceived as honest and hardworking and has a bright future makes a mistake, or a company that's been a very good corporate citizen stumbles because it, say, finds a fly in the hamburger, in both instances they get a pass because they have built up credibility. If you make a mistake and you get tipsy at a party — one of my no-no's — you'll be forgiven if [your colleagues and superiors] like you and think well of you. Just like you'll get forgiven if there's a fly in the hamburger. You'll get a pass because you've built up this insulation, so to speak.

> **"My assumption is that everybody is talented, everyone has substance, everyone is accomplished, and that's when the game actually begins."**

So all these thousands of interactions — from the most mundane water cooler conversations to presentations in front of the board — shape each person's brand. Doesn't viewing the workplace in that way smother spontaneity and risk-taking?

I think one of the ways people can misinterpret the book is by thinking it's calculating, and that if you're calculating you lose creativity and lose your ability to be yourself. I don't see it that way at all. I have taken enormous risks in corporate life all along the path. You have to have the confidence in who you are, in what your brand is, to take those risks.

But the risks I take are with business ideas. I don't take risks with other ventures. The book tries to keep you channeled in recognizing that you're going to make mistakes and you cannot calculate every move, everything you do; that's for certain. But after you've gone through your day, you think about what you've done. If you've made an enemy you didn't want to make, for instance, unmake that enemy.

What did you mean when you wrote that there are five or six big moments that determine the trajectory of your career? What was one of yours?

Often what happens is, the decision about your next step is made in a matter of a few minutes. It isn't as if the executives all go off for a week and think about you. A job opening happens, or a reorganization happens, and there are a bunch of names in front of them. It's almost as if they're playing a game like "Strategy" or "Sorry." They're basically moving pieces across a board. Regardless of the performance appraisals and everything else, four or five people are sitting in a room making the call because they're reorganizing or they're filling slots. I do it all the time in the job I'm in today.

I can give you a personal example. I was taken to lunch by the president of the company [I was working for] at that time and my boss, the chief financial officer. During lunch they said to me, "What do you want to do? There are a couple of job openings; would you be interested in any of these?" And I told them what I'd be interested in. That was it. It wasn't as if they came to lunch saying, "We're going to put you in a new job." They were taking me to lunch to tell me I'd been a good boy. I said to them, "Well, the good boy wants to be rewarded."

It can happen that quickly?

It can happen on a whim. Which is why you always want to be in a position to not have too many enemies in that particular room. You'll probably have one no matter what. If it's five people in the room, you don't want three.

After reading your book, would it be reasonable for someone to believe that presentation, not substance, is the most important part of achieving success in the corporate world?

My assumption is that everybody is talented, everyone has substance, everyone is accomplished, and that's when the game actually begins. But what people don't tell you is, there are a hell of a lot of talented people around. There are lots of great financial people, there are a lot of great marketing people, there are great writers. What distinguishes one from another is not always the quality of their work. The quality of their work at some point is, frankly, hard to discern.

While you say building a solid personal brand requires treating everyone fairly and decently, there are times you think embracing confrontation is good. When?

It does make sense, and god, I pick a lot of [fights] because I actually like the combat. What I say in the book is, don't be mean to people just because you're mean or you're unhappy. Pick a fight when you believe that you are absolutely right and it's worth having the fight.

There are times to pick a fight. You don't say, well, today I'm going to pick a fight because people are thinking I'm wimpy. You pick a fight on something substantive, and you stick with your thought, and if you lose, you lose, but you'll be respected for having picked the fight. You pick a fight when the stakes are worth it, when you feel that your idea is getting diminished or if you really feel it's for the betterment of the organization. Or if you think your reputation is being sullied.

That doesn't mean that on your way to picking your fight that you step on every person, including the security guard in the lobby. I'm very down on picking fights with people who can't fight back. I don't believe you bully or use your power against people who don't have the weapons to fight back.

With so many opportunities, day in and day out, to screw up your personal brand and stall your career, how is it that so many incompetents, even criminals, have made it into the executive suites?

Well, I don't know how many criminals make it into the executive suites. There are a few breathtaking ones who appear to have made it.

Organizations often push up people for not the best reasons. They push them up because they're complete sycophants and the boss likes sycophants. Sometimes, for example, there's a job opening that is equal to the level of your boss but in a different division. People come to your boss and say, "Who should we put in that job?" And your boss sings the praises of some complete wimp. Why does he do that? So he won't have any competition, plus he'll have a person loyal to him working in a competing division. I never underestimate how far sycophants can get in corporate life, organizational life. It never ceases to amaze me.

People who don't make waves often do pretty well. They're uncreative, don't-rock-the-boat people who appeal to that vanillalike executive management crowd. How does that happen? It happens because of what the bosses want, for any number of reasons.

In terms of criminals, I have a different theory on this from that of a lot of people. A lot of people think this is about greed. It has never been about greed. I don't think it's about greed in any of these cases, from Martha Stewart to [former Tyco CEO Dennis] Kozlowski to you name the alleged criminal. I believe it's about arrogance. These people are all rich anyway. If they get another $10 million or $20 million, it does not matter. But they do believe the rules do not apply to them. They believe they are special. They are allowed to sell stock when they want because, after all, it's them. They're allowed to change the accounting because they rule their own empire. They believe without any question that they're special.

They have so many people telling them that they are.

They're really mutants. I kind of resent the fact that there is so much displeasure about corporate executives.

What's the biggest mistake you made in your career?

It was going into corporate life at all [laughs]. I was working for a company in Connecticut, the Control Data Corporation, and I left. There was an opportunity in New York, and I left for that job, and I did not understand the dynamics of the new company. I was absolutely miserable. And to make matters worse, after seven months, I was recruited by somebody and leapt into another job where I was absolutely miserable. I failed to do enough homework on either company. AW

DAVID D'ALESSANDRO'S 10 RULES FOR CAREER SUCCESS

1 Look beyond your navel. Many people become so self-absorbed that they have an absurdly unrealistic view of how others regard them. Knowing how you come across will help you become the person you want to be — that means effective, competent, and fair.

2 Your boss is the coauthor of your brand. Your boss is the filter through which higher-ups view your accomplishments and failings. Treat your relationship with your boss carefully.

3 Put your boss on the couch. Figure out whether your boss is the type to stand in your way or help your brand.

4 Learn which is the pickle fork. Know the importance of etiquette and good manners. Show that you belong in the world of senior executives.

5 Kenny Rogers is right. Sometimes a work situation is hopeless and you have to, as Rogers sang, know when to fold 'em. One example is a family-owned business: Don't expect to rise to the top, because family businesses stay in the family.

6 It's always show time. Big events don't make careers. Attention to mundane, everyday actions builds brands and good careers.

7 Make the right enemies. Never offending anyone dilutes your brand. But make the right choices about the fights you pick.

8 Don't get swallowed by the bubble. If you reach the top, don't believe the stories about your own genius. Surround yourself with people who are honest and be willing to accept criticism.

9 The higher you fly, the more you will be shot at. Success breeds criticism. Prepare to be a target and prepare for bad news — or prevent it — before it happens. Admit when you are wrong and never adopt a bunker mentality.

10 Make sure you stay a contender. It's never too late to change your brand. Be conscious every day of what kind of brand you're building, and don't let setbacks deter you.

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