

Can Brand Apple still thrive without the iconic Steve Jobs?

How it does without its famous CEO will be a lesson to all marketers

Steve Jobs transformed Apple from an also-ran marketer of niche personal computers into one of the world's most powerful lifestyle brands. Along the way, he became synonymous with that brand.

But now that Mr. Jobs is taking a leave of absence to deal with medical issues, the company must face the prospect of life after its iconic CEO. Can Brand Apple survive Steve Jobs? And can this offer a lesson for all marketers to communicate that their bench strength is deeper than the public "faces" of their brands? "Eventually all leaders leave, and it's incumbent upon every company to make sure that all key stakeholders understand the quality and depth of the team behind them," Michael Kempner, CEO of Interpublic Group public-relations shop MWW Group. "Yet, [at Apple] we don't know who they are because they have been kept hidden for so many years."

In Apple's first stint without Mr. Jobs, it didn't take long for the brand to hit the floor. His return in 1996 has been characterized by a stunning streak of products that represent the best of whatever category they enter, from personal computers to phones to music players. Mr. Jobs became like Richard Branson at Virgin, Jay Chiat at TBWA/Chiat/Day or perhaps Jack Welch at General Electric.

But this time around, there's a sense things are different. There has been much debate about the "Jobs premium" in Apple's stock price, but shares dropped just \$1.95 to \$83.38 the day after he announced he was taking leave due to medical issues "more complicated," he said, than he originally thought.

Most believe that if Mr. Jobs' absence is indeed just six months, as he has said it will be, there might be some impact on the stock, but no impact on the brand. "If anything, it stirs up more buzz about him and the company and his role at the company, maybe to the benefit of the brand but to the detriment of the stock," said Andrew Murphy, analyst at Piper Jaffray.

Much of this is due to confidence in Mr. Jobs' team, which has managed to execute products consistently, even though they are largely operating behind the scenes. "The one thing he has done is create an organization to deliver Apple-ness brilliantly," said Allen Adamson, managing director of the New York office of branding firm Landor Associates.

The question is whether the team can keep delivering without Mr. Jobs, especially in the context of a terrible economy, with iPod sales winding down and the iPhone under new competition from BlackBerry, Google's Android and a reinvigorated Palm. "The next two or three product launches will be critical: Will they have the Jobs magic?" Mr. Adamson asked.

By most accounts, Mr. Jobs' role is that of an editor, parsing the ideas brought to him by his lieutenants. Chief Operating Officer Tim Cook has led the company before, during Mr. Jobs' treatment for cancer, and Jonathan Ive is the designer behind Apple products. Very recently, Apple has brought the team more to the fore: Marketing director Phillip Schiller took Mr. Jobs' place delivering the keynote at the Macworld Expo, and Mr. Ive headlined and Mr. Cook took center stage at the October news conference where Apple introduced the new MacBook.

Mr. Jobs may not be as critical as the next iPhone, iPod or MacBook rollout, but his presence within the company will be impossible to replicate, like that of any "bigger than the business" executive. "You can't measure the uplifting feeling employees working in the trenches get when seeing the rockstar CEO walking around headquarters. It's a morale boost, which translates into a productivity and creativity boost," said John Moore of Brand Autopsy.

But Apple will have a tougher time if Mr. Jobs' health forces him out of the company permanently. "If he were to leave, it would be very complicated. Apple has the most unique, compelling, consistent voice of any company," said Alan Siegel, founder of branding firm Siegel & Gale.

Close observers of the company said they believe Apple has been understating the seriousness of Mr. Jobs' condition, and has had a succession plan in place for some time. "There's a underlying sense amongst some of us in the Apple community that Jobs may never return as the company's CEO, and that he's slowly saying his goodbyes," said Kasper Jade, editor of AppleInsider.

Apple has benefited from Mr. Jobs' instincts, his ability to communicate and his iconic status. Now it's coping with the downside of having such a leader: Someday, he won't be around. Said Jez Frampton, group CEO of Interbrand: "Now the worry is the organization has to rewire itself and learn how to make decisions on its own."

LEARMONTH, Michael et al. Can Brand Apple still thrive without the iconic Steve Jobs? **Advertising Age**, v. 80, n. 2, 19 jan. 2009. Disponível em <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>. Acesso em 5/2/2009.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva para fins educacionais