



Women and Perceptions Research Executive Summary



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As a woman, you have to manage two layers of perceptions to propel your success. One is the overall “brand of women” while the other is how others perceive your individual strengths and weaknesses. Savvy, high-achieving women know how to leverage the positive perceptions of both layers. They understand how to capitalize on the strengths of being a woman while reframing the negative misconceptions they often face. In turn, they also pay attention to how others see them as individuals. Combined, by managing these two layers, savvy high-achieving women can build a personal brand that highlights their individual talents - leveraging the power of brand synergy. You can too, when you know how to use perceptions to your benefit.

Managing perceptions is critical to your success as a woman in business. Based upon our many years of working with professional women, this paper will offer insights to help you understand more clearly how to manage perceptions. It also will present fresh research that clearly demonstrates that women are keenly aware that perceptions of the “brand of women” and perceptions of them personally can constrain their success. We also will offer a practical framework to help you better understand the power of perceptions and offer guidelines you can use to manage perceptions proactively. By understanding and managing perceptions you can leverage your authentic strengths to build a stronger personal brand – and position yourself for greater success.

Being a Women is a Brand

What do we mean when we refer to “the brand of women”? We define it as the generally accepted perceptions of the distinctive qualities of women as a gender. The brand of women also may be thought of as the stereotypes or conventional images of women in our business culture. Women, for example, are seen as good relationship builders, strong collaborators, willing to ask clarifying questions, unafraid to ask for help and hesitant to make decisions. We argue that by understanding and managing perceptions you can break down such stereotypes and earn credit for your authentic contributions at work, overcoming potential obstacles to achieving your goals.

To understand today’s zeitgeist of the brand of women one can refer to Sheryl Sandburg’s book Lean In, Katty Kay and Claire Shipman’s Confidence Code or Ann Marie Slaughter’s article in The Atlantic, titled “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All.” The point of view in these and other popular writings clearly is influencing the way women and men perceive the brand of women. (One may argue that an industry has sprouted to promote and exploit the notion of the brand of women.) Much of this work has reshaped the way women think about what they need to do to build a strong personal brand and succeed in the business world.



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The Facts of Perception-Induced Hesitation

Brand Tool Box conducted a quantitative research study to examine women’s attitudes about the way perceptions influence their behaviors and their success in business. The study was conducted during the summer of 2014 by collecting data from a well-distributed cross-section of 132 women, primarily in North America. Those responding met a demographic profile, including occupation title, representative of the population of business professionals. The study was segmented into two components: (1) perceptions of the overall brand of women and, (2) how perceptions of them as individuals can present obstacles to building a stronger personal brand.

Perceptions of the Brand of Women

Respondents evaluated a series of statements designed to assess how perceptions influence their behaviors, directly or indirectly. Women registered their agreement or disagreement with the statements (using a 5-point scale).

The following graphic is a summary of how women responded to each statement. The results show the number of women who “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” with the statements.

Key Research Findings

Women's Perceptions of the Brand of Women



Slightly more than 45 percent of the women agreed with the statement "I feel that I have to work extra hard or I have to stand out to overcome the stereotype of being a woman to get full credit for my contributions."



About one third agreed with the statement "As a woman I feel I am judged by a certain set of standards so I sometimes hesitate to be myself and that limits me from getting credit for my contributions."



About 40 percent agreed with the statement "Sometimes I am hesitant to offer a forceful opinion or be decisive or take a hard stance for fear of being perceived as being 'bossy' or known as a b----."



Over 60 percent agreed with the statement "As a woman I am a natural caretaker and sometimes I am too concerned about others feelings and therefore I may change what I say or how I act with certain people."



47 percent agreed with the statement "Some people have certain perceptions about me that I don't feel are accurate and it is a real challenge for me to change those perceptions."



Almost 50 percent agreed with the statement "With some people I change how I act or what I say based upon how I think they think I should act or what I should say."



Nearly 60 percent agreed with the statement "Sometimes I am too self-critical which causes me to second guess myself and hold back with my comments or actions and this limits my ability to make a contribution."



In about 40 percent of the cases women agreed with the statement "I have certain perceptions of myself that sometimes limit my participation in conversations/activities that I could be contributing to."



More than 50 percent agreed with the statement "Sometimes I feel that some women dismiss other women and their ideas but if a man says the same thing, then the idea or thought is accepted or recognized by the women as making a contribution."



More than 70 percent agreed with the statement "Sometimes I feel like women are more competitive with other women than they are with men."



55% agreed with the statement "Sometimes I am overly concerned about how someone perceives me that I spend too much time focused on 'why does he/she perceive me that way' versus 'what am I doing that is creating that perception.'"

Key Finding. The study's important finding is that a sizeable segment of women hesitate to act or contribute in groups because of their preoccupation with how they are perceived or how they might be perceived. If you're in this group, you know that these perceptual roadblocks are likely to keep you from contributing on teams and in business activities. These external constraints on your contributions can severely inhibit the growth of your personal brand and therefore could limit your future opportunities to leverage your strengths. Your keen sensitivity to perceptions can distract you from making contributions in your professional life. This is in contrast to other segments of women who harness the positive power of perceptions to build a strong personal brand. Some women become prisoners of perceptions, while others proactively manage perceptions to their benefit.



Some women feel more empowered to breakthrough the perceptual gridlock; while others can feel hamstrung by the way others may perceive them.

Personalizing the Power Of Perceptions

Perceptions that are an accurate reflection of who you are is all you can ask. We all know that it's easily said and difficult to pull off. Perceptions can be fickle, unfair and elusive. Sometimes certain perceptions exist that are misinterpretations of our true self. In other cases, people have perceptions that are blind to qualities that we know are real and acknowledged by only a minimum number of people. It can be so frustrating when it feels like you are held hostage by a perception that mischaracterizes you or where you don't get credit for personal or professional qualities you have worked so hard to attain. We wanted to find out how women felt about these two types of perceptual stumbling blocks.

To gain some specific insights about the perceptual quandaries women are experiencing we asked respondents in our study to answer two open-ended questions shown on the next two pages. The response rate to both questions was very high with virtually everyone providing one or more comments to each question.

Perceptions are real and personal for all of us. The perceptions others have of us are not always fair and misperceptions happen all too often. Women often have a "perception gap" to close to connect their authentic self with the real world. With determination guided by a personal brand plan and powered with hard work every woman will be empowered to accelerate and avoid hesitating, mastering the personal power of perceptions.

Key Research Findings Perceptions About Me

Q: If you could change one perception that you believe people have of you, what perception would you change?

Leader/Manager

- “Being a woman I couldn’t possibly have had the experiences necessary to the top position.”
- “Not qualified to manage projects.”
- “Not a leader equal to male counterparts.”

“I think being young can be a harder stereotype to overcome than being female. Or perhaps being young and female combined is what is difficult.”

Youth or appearance of youth holds me back

“That my age means that I am not a skilled leader, despite the results that I obtain on a regular basis.”

Strategic

- “I have more strategic thinking skills than my CEO might realize.”
- “That I’m not strategic.”

- “Too sweet to be a tough boss.”
- “That I am cute and perky.”

Being cute/nice gets in the way

Directness, Intimidating, Toughness

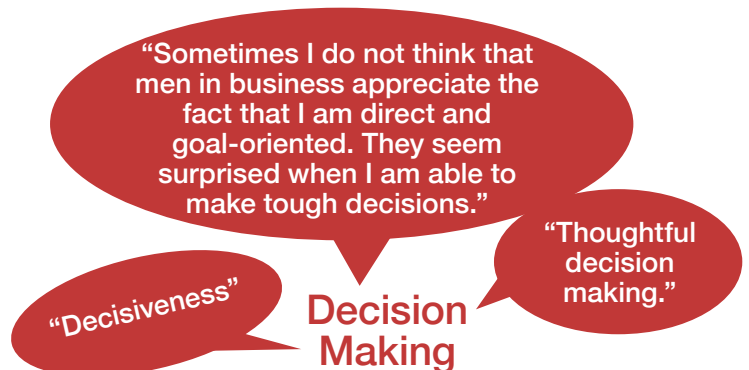
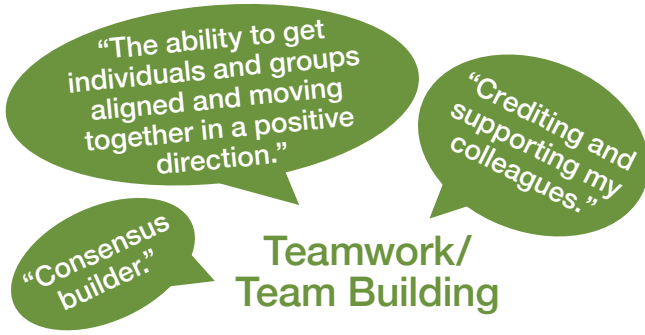
- “I think that people perceive my tendencies to be opinionated and leading others as overly ‘bossy.’”
- “That I am bossy or bitchy if I need to take a hard stance on a decision in the office.”
- “That I push too hard to get things done.”
- “My passion is mistaken for aggression.”
- “That I am harsh because I am a direct communicator.”
- “That I’m intimidating.”

Quiet or Introvert

- “As an introvert sometimes I get the perception that extroverts don’t think to ask for my opinion because I am quieter than they are.”
- “That shyness equals disinterested.”
- “That I’m quiet because I’m shy—I’m actually quiet because I’m listening.”

Key Research Findings Perceptions About Me

Q: What is a quality/strength that you believe you have that you don't get credit for in some of your relationships?



Authors

Karl D. Speak is a global expert known for his pragmatic and unconventional approach to using brand as a leadership platform for gaining customer loyalty and employee engagement. Karl's innovative work on corporate brand strategy, personal brand and internal brand building has been implemented in companies in 23 countries.



His best selling book, *Be Your Own Brand*, is translated into 12 languages and has sold over 100,000 copies. A revised and expanded version of *Be Your Own Brand* was recently released to leverage the global success of the first edition and the growing popularity of personal brand. *Be Your Own Brand* was one of the first books published on the subject of personal brand. This innovative book is the first on the topic to be viewed as a business tool to help employees find alignment with their organization as well as a personal development tool.

Karl holds a Masters Degree in Economics from the University of Minnesota. Karl has taught in the MBA programs at University of Minnesota, St. Thomas University, and has been guest lecturer at University of Westminster in London, Capella University, ESADE University in Madrid, among others.

Karl's boardroom experience includes being a board member of Mesa Holdings, VocalEssence, MAP and serving as the chair of the board of The Design Management Institute.



Dr. Heather Backstrom has more than 20 years of experience in all aspects of organization and leadership development including executive coaching, workshop design and delivery, team interventions and meeting facilitation. The breadth of her experience spans organizations in the for-profit, not-for-profit and public sector arenas.



She started her career in the private sector at Toyota and then expanded into the not-for-profit and public sector domains. Her rich expertise includes City of Hope National Medical Center, Beach Cities Health District, Moog and JPL. With a passion for learning and continuing education, Dr. Backstrom is also an adjunct faculty member with the University of Redlands where she delights in teaching undergraduate and MBA students.

Her love for leadership development work started early in her career, first as a trainer then as an instructional designer, OD consultant and executive coach. With keen insight on the interpersonal challenges that individuals and teams face Dr. Backstrom is adept at addressing leadership and organizational effectiveness issues.

An enthusiastic learner herself she received a doctorate degree in organizational leadership from Pepperdine University.

She is a volunteer with the Tournament of Roses Association and on the Board of Directors with the American Red Cross San Gabriel Valley-Pomona Chapter. She is a member of Provisors and Leadership Pasadena.

The research data found in this executive summary plus a set of recommended actions to address the perceptual hurdles facing women can be found in a comprehensive report on the Brand Tool Box website.

Brand Tool Box has developed a workshop and professional development experience enabling women attendees to leverage their authentic strengths to breakthrough many of the perceptual roadblocks highlighted in this research report.

Brand Tool Box, founded in 1984 by Karl D. Speak, is the global leader in developing and implementing internal brand-building programs. It is a unique professional services organization melding world-class brand expertise and organizational development best practices to help organizations build and nourish customer-centric culture alignment. Brand Tool Box's consulting processes, training programs and organizational development tools have been successfully implemented in companies across virtually all industry segments including non-profits and government organizations.

Brand Tool Box has successfully packaged its intellectual property into a portfolio of training workshops, coaching and consulting templates and personal development tools. The products have been used in a range of business and personal development applications, ranging from internal brand building, sales training, to leadership-development coaching.



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