

## The eyes have it: give your brand a human face

Rachel Nickless

Sometimes it's what you don't see that's the problem with a leadership brand, says branding expert Mary van de Wiel.

The founder and chief executive of Zingyourbrand.com is often called in to do a "brand audit" on a company and finds the leadership team isn't even featured on the company's own website.

"A lot of Australian chief executives are reluctant to have any visibility," she says. They often say they don't want to be seen as tall poppies or they think it's all a nonsense.

But van de Wiel argues that "it's not giving a company a robust profile if the top man or woman is missing". Whether you're looking for the next big job or to attract more customers, "your biggest competitive advantage is how to show up in the marketplace, how to stand out and create value," she

says.

Van de Wiel spoke with *The Australian Financial Review* ahead of her speech on the art of creating a leadership brand at the Australian Human Resources Institute national convention in Melbourne last week.

The woman who helped launch *Who* weekly magazine in Australia and went on to run her own branding agency in New York says: "It's not enough to be brilliant.

"A brand is just telling people about your business, what you do and why it matters and why they should give a damn".

Van de Wiel urges leaders to tell their own "brand story". "Our brains are wired to hear and tell stories," she says.

That is why people respond to and remember **Richard Branson**. "He tells his story, he talks about what drives and motivates him. Everything he does has his stamp of personality," she says.



Branding expert Mary van de Wiel

There are plenty of leaders who aren't so keen on jumping out of planes or being photographed with leggy flight attendants. Van de Wiel responds: "the joy of it is that everyone is different.

"It doesn't matter whether you are an introvert [chief executive] or not, you still have an interesting story to tell."

In one of her blogs she praises the brand story of Jeff Nussbaum, a partner at Washington DC speech-writing firm West Wing Writers.

On the company website it says: "The

first speech Jeff Nussbaum wrote was to defend himself against suspension from high school. It was unsuccessful. Since that time, Jeff has written speeches, op-eds and promotional materials." The story is idiosyncratic and captivating, van de Wiel says.

She adds that tone is possibly more important than the message itself, suggesting leaders record themselves to see how they really come across.

She also urges leaders to be aware of what makes them tick and their values. "If you have no perception of why you are there, you can't be that compassionate about people you are leading," she says. Being willing to be open and vulnerable to some extent is important in an authentic brand, she says.

"Brand intelligence is really about bringing a more human face to the table instead of keeping people at arm's length," she says.