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Apple and Steve Jobs: Can you separate the brand from the man?

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Despite the benefits of having a CEO synonymous with its brand, Apple must ensure that its brand is bigger than its leader.

The unexpected news that CEO Steve Jobs was to take medical leave was promptly accompanied by two less than unexpected events – Apple Inc shares dipped, and business commentators voiced their concerns for the future of the world’s largest technology firm.

"Steve is more important to his company’s success than most other CEOs are to their company’s success," noted Roger Kay, president of **Endpoint Technologies Associates**. "Without him at the helm, we just don’t know whether the company can continue on its successful course," independent analyst Jeff Kagan told IDG.

The doom mongers have been out in force, some of which are seemingly more concerned about the implications of the news for the brand, rather than the implications for the man. But for many, the two are indeed inextricably linked.

"Steve Jobs is Apple and Apple is Steve Jobs," says Richard Houghton, partner at **Carrot Communications**. "His personal brand is so closely aligned with the company that their reputation rises and falls in tandem."

This is a rare feat. In recent memory, only Richard Branson and perhaps Larry Ellison ("a similar, if not so popular, talismanic leader" notes Houghton) have obtained a similar connection to the brand. And it is a connection that can be hugely beneficial.

"[Jobs] makes human what would otherwise be just another technology brand," explains Jessica Bower, account director at **Sundance London**. "He embodies many values that connect with the brand's audience: he's a West Coast baby boomer, made a great comeback with Apple. Co-founding Pixar cemented his credentials on the creative, cool wing of computing. If, as many would say, Apple has created a modern-day cult around its brand, Jobs is its undisputed guru."

"The pros include a high level of personal and emotional engagement with the CEO," adds Robert Passikoff, president of **Brand Keys**. "It makes it easy for the press and consumers to 'tune in' to the company and products, as it were."

Dramatic developments

But, adds Passikoff, there are also challenges associated with having a leader that represents the brand. "The cons are all the to-do you're seeing now. All the emotional 'who's going to come up with cool designs if Steve isn't there to do it?' and the rational fact that the stock take a hit because he's been the face of the company for a very long time. He's the one on stage and online. He's the one that gets to introduce all the cool stuff coming out of Apple. And to give him his due, he was the one who brought the company back from the brink."

Furthermore, due to the passionate relationship that Apple has with its customers, the development is all the more dramatic.

"The issue is particularly pertinent to Apple because of the close relationship that the brand's community of early-adopters have with the company," says Bower. "While it has recruited a wider audience, a smaller group of almost-evangelical advocates remains central to the brand's success. This community engages with Apple at a level that goes far beyond products and brand, identifying themselves at a deeper level with the company itself: a once-small challenger made good that exemplifies the dream that innovation, inspiration and sheer audacity can bring great rewards. While many companies manage

their internal organisation scrutinised mainly by their investors, Apple has a much larger community of people looking at the company, hence the perceived impact of changes."

And for many, it is crystal clear what Apple must address if it is to avoid a potential crisis.

"Apple has been candid about Jobs' illness for a while, and have made a wise decision to communicate it as medical leave, being more transparent than many companies might be about the potential long-term implications for leadership," continues Bower.

"Apple now faces the challenge familiar to so many companies as it grows – how to ensure the brand really is larger than the key people driving it. Virgin Group remains for many synonymous with the energy and vision of Sir Richard Branson, and in the case of Dyson the connection between founder and brand is even closer. Apple has no shortage of talent within the company – but we need to get to know them in order to prove Apple as a brand, not a person."

Houghton is in agreement. "Mitigating concerns in this situation is all about successor management and this is something that the alleged control freak Jobs has not been great at since he returned to run the company in 1996," he suggests.

A new story

But the halls of power at Apple are certainly not without their fair share of creative and business talent. As Passikoff notes: "Jobs may be the face and even the heart of the company, but happily from a management perspective, he isn't the only talent Apple possesses. Outside of the tech and investment arenas, names like Tim Cook, Phillip Schiller, Scott Forstall, Jonathan Ive, and Ron Johnson (COO, worldwide product marketing, iPhone engineering, industrial design, and retail respectively) may not cause techies' hearts to flutter, but they are the management team that drives the company."

More than just demonstrating that there is a capable team to take charge in Jobs' absence, however, Apple could also mitigate concerns by demonstrating that many of the company's values that Jobs represented will continue in his absence: true passion for innovation, design excellence and almost unstoppable momentum around new product development.

This will not be easy, however. "Jobs' presence at the launches of so many iconic Apple products in the period since his initial absence has made him a universally-recognised signifier of the brand's values and closely associated with the new golden age of Apple. And it is almost certainly not a question of replacing this one key person with another figurehead," says Bower. "Instead, for the brand's long-term success, now is the time to grasp the nettle and ensure the brand itself truly forges a deeper connection with its brand community, built upon many of the values that Jobs so successfully encapsulated for the brand."

"Because Steve Jobs and the Apple story are one and the same, it will take time for stakeholders to learn a new story," predicts Sara Tye, founder of [redheadpr](#). "It will be important to communicate consistently and regularly. Tim Cook didn't waste any time in doing this. Inspiring and communicating a vision will be crucial."

People buy brands

Nonetheless, while the anxiety levels of industry watchers and investors have been soaring, not everyone is convinced that a brand crisis is playing out. Passikoff, for instance, remains confident that while the shareholders may be concerned, the Apple brand will ultimately prove to be more than just one man – no matter how influential that man is.

"I think the fall out will be short term. He'll leave, the company (and brand) will do just fine, the stock will go down, then they'll report that he's calling in five times a day, the stock will go back up, they'll introduce some new, cool product, and life will go on."

Passikoff concludes: "People may admire CEOs, but they buy brands. Today, real 21st century 'brands' are products or services that are so strongly imbued with values and articulated meaning that they are easily differentiated from the competition. Or in the case of the Apple iPod, just plain out own the category, (because really, when's the last time you saw somebody listening to their Zune or Archos?). There's a Russian maxim that goes 'visionaries are leaders with a poorly developed sense of fear.' And while there may be only one Steve Jobs, the fact that there's also only one Apple brand should help allay shareholder fears."

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