

INTRODUCTION

This book is for the dreamers: the people who imagine a more exciting job, a more fulfilling relationship, a different way to spend their waking hours, doing something entirely new, fresh and thrilling with their lives.

Three vivid childhood memories prompted me to write this book and have contributed to my personal journey for the last three decades.

The first goes back to when I was eight or nine and a keen (actually, obsessive) reader of Hugh Lofting's Dr Dolittle books. Strangely, perhaps, it wasn't the push-me-pull-you or the other exotic creatures (not to mention the doctor's ability to talk to the animals) that fascinated me most about the books. Instead it was Dr Dolittle's entrepreneurial and action-oriented character. He seemed to be one of those people who just made things happen. He turned dreams into action. Even stranger is the fact that it was one of his more modest achievements that excited me the most.

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In one adventure Dr Dolittle opened and ran a post office. It wasn't a great enterprise but it captured my imagination utterly. On long car journeys I would doze and daydream in the back seat of our Morris Minor, thinking through the process of opening and running a post office. This was an early stirring of desire for an enterprising life, although it took me a long time to get beyond daydreaming.

A few years later, when I was perhaps 14, there was a careers fair at school. Local companies talked to pupils about careers in engineering, accountancy, the armed forces and banking. By this time, I had given up my dream of opening a post office staffed by talking animals and was nurturing the notion of being a writer. Needless to say, the careers fair didn't have any literature about how to realize my dream. Instead, I found myself drawn into a long and miserable conversation with a man from Barclays, who thought I would be very well suited to train as a bank manager. I don't remember what I said to him but I do remember feeling that this was the moment at which my dreams would begin to die.

The third event happened about a year later. I got involved with a few kids in school who had formed a pretty ghastly pre-punk prog rock band that specialized in lyrical ballads about battles and witches. I was nominally the lyricist and the guitarist, and a very bad guitarist (and lyricist) I was, too. So bad in fact that, despite my powerful deep-rooted desire to perform, I did one performance and didn't touch a guitar or sing in public again for nearly 20 years. I decided, simply, that my dream of being a performer

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was about as achievable as that of running a business or being a writer.

So, at some point in my early teens I was ready to settle for what life dealt me. Not that it was intrinsically bad. I enjoyed a safe, comfortable, relatively affluent childhood. I was loved and cared for. But I was also aware that I was going to get stuck and that my dreams would remain dreams.

I have never believed that you can make things happen simply by dreaming: simply by being positive or by acting 'as if'. I do believe, however, that dreaming, being positive and acting are crucial elements in the endeavour of becoming the person that you want to be. And I absolutely don't believe that we have to settle for the outcome that life appears to have dealt us, or into which we have gently fallen.

It took me nearly 20 years to realize my dream of becoming a performer (I'm now a keynote speaker and a singer in a band). It took me 30 years to begin to fulfil my ambition of running a business (not a post office with talking animals, but a consultancy and my business Left Hand Bear). And it took me the best part of 40 years to become a professional writer.

Looking back, I think 20, 30, 40 years is too long to wait to fulfil your ambitions, so this book is all about fast-tracking those dreams. If I'd understood as a 14-year-old what I understand now, I wouldn't have had to wait so long. I'm determined that you won't have to do the same.

I know too many people for whom life in its many aspects, from work to relationships, seems to be something like a lobster pot. It's easy to travel in

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one direction but much harder, practically speaking, impossible, to travel in the other. In other words, for some people there is a sense of helplessness in the face of life's circumstances, which they manage by adopting a kind of stoic acceptance.

In one important philosophical and physical sense, this is true. Time moves in one direction. You can't undo the things you have done, nor un-experience your experiences, any more than you can un-stir the sugar from your coffee. To take this truth to mean that change is impossible, however, is to accept defeat when in fact we are not facing defeat but challenge.

This book then is about challenge: and specifically the challenge of changing your life from the one you have reluctantly accepted to the one that you dream about from time to time.

Perhaps you want to change your working life utterly, or simply improve your prospects at work. Perhaps you want to get a job, any job. Perhaps you face a conflict of some kind at work: a difficult boss or an impossible challenge. Perhaps you are facing redundancy. Maybe you have always wanted to start a business, or are struggling to launch one.

Or maybe the change you need to make is in your personal life: your relationships or self-image, or a desire to find personal fulfilment through a hobby or some form of creative endeavour.

The specifics of the change you require aren't important at this point. What *is* important is that you desire change. To move forwards, not in denial of what has come before, but nevertheless refusing to

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be defined or restricted by it. You are, after all, not a lobster in a pot but a human being with imagination, personality, abilities, energy and character.

This book is not one of those that promise if you follow certain behaviours you are guaranteed to achieve certain results. I can't make that promise. But it will show you how to utilize a particular set of strategies and techniques that I have used and seen working successfully in business: the art of branding, which has been my world for almost a decade.

But why, you might reasonably ask, should branding be of relevance and use in the task of changing my life? Well, there's a simple reason, which I will try to explain.

Branding is one of the key approaches, perhaps *the* key one, by which companies and other organizations, holiday destinations, cities and entire countries reinvent and shape their reputations in order to achieve success. Throughout the past century, and over the last 20 years in particular, branding has arguably become the single most important activity undertaken by any successful company, organization or place. Without the concept of brand and the art (and a bit of science) of branding, modern business simply wouldn't exist as we know it. If you think that I'm exaggerating, pause for a moment and consider the world's most successful businesses. What would Apple be without its 'brand'? Or Nike? Or Coca-Cola?

Now what is most interesting about branding, as far as we are concerned, is that businesses never see themselves as being stuck in the lobster pot. If a business doesn't like its circumstances, it endeavours

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to change. Businesses (and organizations and places) are rarely hampered by a sense that things can't be changed or improved. The simple reason for this is that businesses are not people: they don't feel or think or believe anything at all. They are not optimists or pessimists, introverts or extroverts. They are constructs. And because they are not hampered by the self-limiting beliefs of us humans, they can endeavour to become whatever their owners or senior management team want them to become by utilizing branding strategies and techniques. Sometimes these are used to make subtle changes to a company: to tweak its reputation, to explore new business opportunities or enhance performance in the market. Sometimes though, the same approaches are used to completely reinvent a business, or to utterly change the profile and standing of the entire business, or organization, or place. Businesses are not hampered by self-doubt, so they are free to create and re-create themselves to become what they wish to be (or at least to try).

These branding approaches can be applied just as effectively to our individual lives. In fact, I will go further and say that I have seen it happen. I have seen it work. I have seen lives change, all through the application of the techniques of branding.

And it's not in any way random or coincidental that these branding approaches can be applied usefully to us as individuals. We can use the ideas of brand and branding in our lives because the very power of branding as a business strategy stems from its origins in the human imagination. Branding is about telling compelling stories and the creation of 'meaning',

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which derives from our intrinsic human nature. We are meaning-makers and storytellers all. We have learned to apply the power of story to business, but I think many of us have forgotten how to apply it to our lives.

This book, therefore, is about taking a particular set of techniques (actually it might be better to look at it as a particular outlook or mindset), which derive from business, and applying them to your working life, creativity, relationships and, even, to your self-perception and inevitably your whole life. It is about learning to tell your story and creating your life meaning.

I should probably explain here that this book isn't about how to shake hands firmly and look people in the eye in interviews. Neither will it tell you how to complete a CV, about bragging or about how to gain a million followers on a social networking site.

We touch on some of those issues in passing but they are not the important ones. In fact, this book isn't about 'personal branding' in the conventional sense at all. There are books about 'personal branding' and plenty of people out there who will advise or coach you about your 'personal brand'. But by using this book, I hope you can achieve something more profound because it is written with the ambition of helping you to make real change in your life.

In fact, over the period of writing this book, I have come to describe the journey as one that is about finding and building 'character'. That old phrase 'character-building' seems to fit well. Another word that seems to describe the process is 'reinvention'.

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What you are about to read is a kind of manual for building the character that you want for yourself; a guide to reinventing yourself as a character able to play an important, exciting and fulfilling role in the drama of life.

I said at the outset that this book is for the dreamers, but particularly those dreamers who have their feet on the ground while keeping their eyes on the future. I urge you not to stop dreaming, but rather to harness your dreams and make them real.

Throughout the book, you'll find the inspirational stories of just a few of the thousands of people who have used personal or business branding to successfully reinvent themselves and achieve their dreams.

The following chapters will give you an approach to doing what has worked for me, and others, and which I believe can work for you, too - regardless of your age, work history, qualifications or present circumstances.

Chapter 1

WHAT IS A BRAND AND WHY DOES IT MATTER TO YOU?

So, what possible relevance could the story of a 'brand' have to you and your life? Why would I want to tell you about famous (and not so famous) businesses, and why should you care? Well, the answer lies in being clear about the real definition of 'brand'.

Most people think – and it's easy to understand why – that a 'brand' is just another word for the 'logo' of a business. In other words, Nike has a very distinctive tick shape, known as 'the swoosh'. One of the curious things about the Nike brand, and this is indicative of an interesting aspect of branding in general, is that so many people know that that tick shape has been given a name. Why do so many of us know that Nike's logo is called 'the swoosh'? I think it is because there is a fundamental truth about brand; a brand is about stories and the logo having a name is a kind of story in its own right. And humans are hard-wired to love stories.

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Regardless of whether we know the name of the Nike logo or not, that tick shape has become iconic. We see it everywhere: on shoes, on shirts and hoodies, in advertising campaigns and on packaging. We see it when we watch sports and on MTV. We see it in newspapers and magazines, on TV, at the cinema. Everywhere.

But is the swoosh Nike's brand?

No, it isn't. It's something else. The logo isn't the brand; it is just a trigger that reminds us of the existence of the Nike brand. Even more importantly, it is a stimulus which reminds us of the set of meanings that Nike wants to conjure up in our minds when we think about the brand. But it's not just about thinking, about what goes on in our heads, it's also about what we feel. The Nike logo, like any other, is designed to make us feel something: to trigger an emotional response.

There are actually three important things to remember here. First, that the logo is not the brand itself: the logo is one of the triggers designed to create a response to the brand. Second, that the response is just as much emotional (more so, actually) as rational. And third, that the logo is just one of the many tools that a brand can use to try to achieve the response it wants. We will look at all of those tools in due course.

So if the logo isn't the brand, what actually is a brand?

I have always defined brand as 'a set of meanings'. The brand of a product, or a company, or a place, or an individual is therefore the total of the meanings that it has in the minds and hearts

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of others. To put it another way, and let's say we're talking about a brand of coffee for example, the 'brand' is the sum total of all the things that people think and feel about that coffee.

In fact it goes even further than what you think or feel in a particular moment, because brand is influenced not only by what you have experienced yourself, but also by what you've heard from others, or what you've read in the papers or seen on TV. There are so many influences that it would be more accurate to describe the brand of our hypothetical coffee as being the sum total of everything that we think, feel, suspect, imagine, believe, hope, fear, have read or heard or seen about that coffee. The influences are so varied and so powerful, and the relationship between them so complex, that ultimately the 'brand' of the coffee doesn't really lie in the complete control of the coffee company at all (although the company would much prefer that it did), but in the collective heads and hearts of all the people who are exposed to it. In the end, it is the consumer who decides whether that brand of coffee is good, bad or indifferent, and therefore whether or not it will be a success in the marketplace.

But that can't be right, can it? Surely that logic would lead us to conclude that companies can't really do much about their brands after all. Well, no, far from it. In fact, companies have a huge opportunity to influence what people think and feel (and imagine and believe, and so on) about their products and thus to shape their brands. But they have to remember that brands are always about 'meaning' and, like

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beauty, meaning lies in the eyes of the beholder. So, brand owners are far from powerless, but they have to remember the sobering truth that the creation of brand meaning requires a pact between brand and audience - between 'them' and 'us'.

ABUNDANCE AND MISERY

So if brand is 'meaning', what does that actually 'mean' in practice and why does it matter? Why do companies, products, even places need to create 'meanings'?

The answer lies in a marketing concept known as 'the misery of choice'. This refers to the relatively modern phenomenon of abundance. In the developed world, even during times of hardship and recession, we live in times of abundance. All around us there are things and experiences to buy. I live in Norwich - it's only a small city, but if I was so inclined, I could eat out in a different pub or restaurant every night for around six months before having to visit any of them a second time.

And if you live in any of the world's capitals, you could eat out forever, choosing a different restaurant every night because by the time you got back to the first one again, it would, in all probability, have been taken over and reopened under a different name, serving completely different food.

If you want to buy a car you are presented with a choice of at least a couple of dozen makes and models, even if you narrow it down to a class of car such as a small family hatchback.

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When you need to replace your laptop computer, how do you choose from the staggering array of makes and models? And if you want to select a new mobile phone contract, how do you unpick all the benefits of the plethora of different tariffs available?

This 'abundance' of choice applies even if you want to buy something as simple as a magazine or a newspaper, a washing-up liquid or toothpaste.

This is the misery of choice, and faced with an intimidating array of options we have come to use a system of signs and associated meanings to navigate our way quickly and effectively. That system is what we refer to as branding.

We buy a certain type of toothpaste each time because we have come to feel comfortable with that particular brand. And why do we feel comfortable? It is because we have come to associate that toothpaste with certain meanings. It tastes and feels fresh, perhaps. Or we have come to trust that it protects our sensitive teeth from pain when brushing. Or we are comfortable that it doesn't contain unnecessary chemical agents, so we think it is safer for our children. Or it has a mild whitening effect. Whatever the reason, the point is that we don't have to think through this set of meanings every time we purchase. We select the brand we know because it is the shortcut to the meanings that are our guide through the misery of choice.

Toothpaste is an odd example, you might be thinking, because toothpaste isn't really something we dwell on too much. And actually, I can almost hear you say, sometimes we simply buy the toothpaste that is 'on offer' in some way.

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Yes, that's all true. In fact, toothpaste falls into the category of what marketers call 'low-involvement purchases', which means precisely that - we don't get too involved in the whole thing (either emotionally or intellectually). Yes, we are influenced by special offers, but we have a very strong tendency (even with low-involvement products) to revert to our preferred brand, or even our preferred kind of brand. So we might well choose the special offer product that we have never heard of, but we are much more inclined to do so if the special offer product appears to have some equivalence to our usual brand. In other words, we like offers but we still look for meaning.

It's for this reason that there is so much brand imitation in supermarkets. Breads, cereals, biscuits, toothpastes and many other consumables will tend to look a lot like each other, and particularly like the established and trusted market leader: they are all trying to take some reflected positive meaning for themselves. Being cheap rarely wins in the battle for consumer loyalty by itself.

BRAND CHOICES AND WHAT THEY MEAN

So, if even low-involvement purchases utilize brand meaning, when it comes to high-involvement purchases, such as a new car, brand meaning is extraordinarily powerful.

Let's think about cars for a moment. BMW means something quite different from Volvo does it not? Even if you are not remotely interested in cars, you will have heard the word 'safety' associated with Volvo.

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The two Swedes who founded Volvo in 1919 were acutely aware that motoring, particularly at that time, was a rather dangerous activity. Cars didn't have any of the safety features of modern vehicles, roads were unregulated and drivers untrained. So these two progressive thinkers set out to create a car that was safer than others. Safety is not an affectation of Volvo's marketing people: safety is a meaning that is built into the fabric of the company. Volvo, in a very real sense, means safety.

BMW, on the other hand, means something quite different and it is usually associated with the driver's experience. The rear-wheel drive and engineering makes BMWs (if you like driving) great fun to drive. They are powerful, precise, stable and so on. So driver experience has become the meaning of BMW. For many years the company used the slogan 'The ultimate driving machine' to express this thought. In recent years they have changed to the simple one-word slogan 'Joy'. It is trying to express the same idea, but with a softer and less masculine feel.

Whether you or I like cars, these particular brands or their slogans, is not the point. The point is that successful brands (sometimes quickly and sometimes over decades) establish a small set of meanings that are resonant with enough people to give them a clear 'position' in the terrifyingly muddled marketplace.

So if your prime interest is safety, then Volvo will be on your list of cars to consider. If you are interested in the excitement of driving, then a BMW will have more appeal, and so on.

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Coca-Cola is 'real', meaning original, and by implication better than any other fizzy soft drink. New Zealand is 'pure' and 'different', meaning unlike any other holiday destination in the world. John Lewis offers 'quality, service and value'. The BBC is 'trusted'. Rice Krispies are 'fun'. McDonald's is consistently 'satisfying' wherever you go.

I could go on at great length. Some brands have a meaning that can be expressed in one simple word – such as Volvo – to a degree where they virtually own the concept. Others are more layered or nuanced.

The common thread of great brands is that they tend to have either one single, powerful meaning above all others, or a small, closely linked set of complementary meanings

A MEANINGFUL LIFE

It is worth dwelling on this concept because I want you to think about your meaning or set of meanings and how they might help you to achieve your ambitions in work and in life.

Let's keep those two (work and life) separate just for a moment or two longer and let me give you a personal example that lies at the heart of why I have written this book.

I was a latecomer to the idea of creating 'meaning' for myself. I searched for it for three decades but I didn't really understand what I was looking for. The big mistake I made repeatedly was in thinking that meaning lay outside of how I spent my working days and, until a few years ago, I was somewhat divided from myself.

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I had, if you remember, a childhood fantasy of running a post office or shop. Later I dreamed of becoming a writer. Like many teenagers, I fantasized, too, about being a singer, a pop star! I also obsessed for several years about Grand Prix motor racing, and in the early 1970s I applied for a mechanic's apprenticeship with the British Formula 1 motor-racing team BRM. I managed to get an interview with the chief mechanic, who was astute and experienced enough to realize that I wasn't really interested in becoming a mechanic at all, but was in fact set on becoming a driver. I had read the story of how the great Graham Hill had got his first break that way. The chief mechanic knew that story, too, and I was sent away heartbroken.

None of this muddled struggling with ambition is in any way unusual. And I went on with my muddled struggling for a long time to come. I thought I had talent in writing and art and planned to study art history at university. But I did spectacularly badly in my A-levels and ended up taking a degree in education, combined with a primary school teaching qualification, although I never wanted to teach. On graduating I tried to get into the local newspaper on their graduate journalism-training scheme, but the scheme closed the year I needed it. Instead, I got a junior job in a PR consultancy. For the best part of five years I learned to write, some of the rudiments of marketing and I grew up a little. But I still failed to integrate my work with 'me'. I was, in a very real way, alienated from myself.

I thought that all the 'meaning' in my life lay outside my work. I married at 19, while still at college (and am still married, very happily, to the same

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person, 33 years later), and our first child, Paul, was born when I was 24. At home I wrote endless (rather bad) poems and short stories: a few even got published. But my two worlds of work and life were separate. My 'meaning' lay in my marriage, my family and my writing, while I spent long working days engaged in something quite separate: something that held no meaning for me at all.

It took me many years to integrate my working life with my 'life', and it was only when I managed to merge the two that I transformed from being frustrated to fulfilled.

And the process by which I made that transformation might well be referred to as the creation of meaning. Some people would call it reinvention. What I have learned in recent years, by being involved in the worlds of business and branding, is that I actually re-branded myself. Or to be more accurate, I created a brand for myself for the first time.

And I don't mean that I dressed myself up superficially to be something different. I mean that I deliberately turned myself into a 'project'. I gave myself a new set of meanings, which successfully integrated my work with the rest of my life.

In so doing, I transformed my life inside and out. I became happier and healthier, and more at ease in the world.

I didn't make my transformation until I was a little over 50 years old. You don't have to wait that long. It's not a question of age or experience but of strategy.

Now it is time for the first of many exercises that you'll find throughout this book. First, find a

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notebook, or create a new file on your computer and title it appropriately, perhaps 'Brand Me', to record your answers and findings, and refer to as you journey through your transformation.

None of the exercises are complex but they are meant to be challenging. Rather than quiz-type exercises with pre-determined answers, you simply respond to open questions. There are no right or wrong answers and in all likelihood you will be the only person ever to read what you write. Write a little or write a lot, use sentences or just scribble phrases: it is up to you. The important thing is to try to focus your thinking, and completing the exercises can be a useful way to do that. You might even think of them as a kind of meditation.

EXERCISE I: YOUR MEANING NOW

First, recall what you've read in the previous pages about brand 'meaning'. Remember that brands are about the creation of sets of meanings. Creating your personal brand is about the creation of meaning, too.

This exercise is very simple, but it requires you to be honest (really honest) in order for it to have value. We will revisit it later, at which time some of your answers may change.

For now, write down the 'meanings' that you think you represent in the minds and hearts of those who know you - how do others perceive you and your values? I have suggested a number of headings below, which you might like to use because

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it may be that your meanings might vary depending on your audience.

Partner

If you have a life partner, make a note about what he or she thinks or feels about you. It might be that they think of you as 'kind' or 'energetic', or 'sporty' or 'lazy'. Keep going until you've really captured what they think and feel about you. Remember to be completely honest with yourself.

Family

Include your children, your parents, your siblings and other relatives under this heading. You may want to separate them out.

Friends

Include those closest to you, as well as more casual acquaintances.

Colleagues

Try to include the colleagues with whom you have less than positive relationships, as well as your actual work friends.

Your boss

Most of us have more than one boss, but you can choose the most appropriate one, or two.

Yourself

Try to step outside yourself and be as objective as possible here. What are your meanings to yourself?

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That exercise might have been quite painful, but don't worry, this is a journey that you're on now. You are now your own brand project and you're already making progress.

REAL-LIFE REINVENTORS

Dr Izzeldin Abuelaish: medical doctor and peace campaigner

In 2009, Israeli shells fell on Dr Abuelaish's family home in Gaza, killing three of his young daughters and their cousin. Overwhelmed by grief and despair, and knowing the only way to save them was to get them to an Israeli hospital, the doctor phoned an Israeli journalist friend. As a result, the horror was transmitted live on Israeli television and later to the wider world through YouTube. Rather than grow embittered about his loss, Dr Abuelaish determined that the girls' deaths should not be in vain and turned his personal story of tragedy into a powerful peace campaign. His mission is to show the world, through this tragic story, that not every Palestinian is motivated by revenge. Dr Abuelaish is now a professor of global health at the University of Toronto and has travelled the world campaigning for peace. He has won humanitarian awards, been nominated for the Nobel peace prize and has established a charitable foundation, Daughters for Life, to support the education of girls.