

**What's your One Thing?
Branding the Radford Graduate**

David N. Martin
Martin Branding Worldwide
Radford University Commencement
May 8, 2010

In the next few minutes I'd like for you to start you thinking about ways to become a brand yourself--- a competitive power with added value in the marketplace.

When I say, "Become a brand," I'm dramatizing what you can do to stand apart from the crowd. People are more complex and multifaceted than products. But because that is true, it's important to focus your identity. So, just for fun, let's see what it takes for you to transform into a brand ready for the marketplace.

First, understand what a brand is. It is not a logo. It is not a slogan. It is not advertising.

A brand signals an expectation of performance. That expectation never changes. That's the core strength I'm talking about.

Let's say you are out sailing and a ship rapidly approaches. As it gets closer you can see a flag flying from the main mast . . . a black flag emblazoned with white skull and crossbones. You most definitely know what to expect when you see that brand flapping in the breeze.

When you see a red Coca-Cola sign anywhere in the world, you expect the drink to be "Delicious, refreshing, exhilarating"--the three words Coke used to launch the product back in 1886. Clearly, quenching one's thirst is the primary human motive satisfied by a delicious, refreshing, exhilarating glass of Coca-Cola.

What is the core strength of a Volvo automobile?

Most people will say, “Safety.” This core strength is a direct appeal to the basic human motivation of self-preservation. At Volvo safety is a fact of business life, not an empty slogan. Fifty years ago, Volvo’s managing director was married to a physical therapist who was horrified to see what auto accidents were doing to the people of Sweden. After some pillow talk, safety became a mission at Volvo, an R&D priority. That’s why Volvo has pioneered so many of today’s safety features.

So the core strength of brand is a constant. It never changes. That way, consumers always know what to expect.

So now we have defined what a brand is. And you—*yourself*—are ready to take the steps necessary to become a value-added brand with a clearly-defined core strength ready for the marketplace. Where do you start? What talent can you convert into the one thing that is your core strength?

In the movie *City Slickers*, Billy Crystal played Mitch, a middle-aged dude from Manhattan, unhappy with his job, and disillusioned with life, who ventured out west because to find himself. On a cattle drive deep in the middle of nowhere, Curly, the range boss, turns to Mitch and asks, “You know the secret of life?”

“No, what?” Mitch asks.

“This.” Curly holds up his forefinger.

“Your finger?”

“Just one thing,” Curly says. “You stick with that and the rest don’t mean spit.”

Mitch says. “That’s great, but what’s the one thing?”

Curly smirks and says, “That’s what you’ve gotta find out.”

Find your one thing. Do some introspective thinking. Think about what comes naturally to you. Maybe your one thing is **empathy**, or innate **common sense**, or the ability to **make things happen**, or to **see the big**

picture; to organize, to lead, to take charge—maybe you are **a natural at math, or love to teach or help others**. Maybe you have **a natural gift for fashion, or color, or design**. In sports, maybe you are intrigued by the **strategy** of the game. These are natural talents that with applied skill and experience can be converted into unique core strengths.

A recent article in *Time* Magazine about the iPad described Apple Computer’s founder, Steve Jobs, as existing “somewhere between **showman, perfectionist, visionary, enthusiast and opportunist**.” Those are five strengths he was born with. One of them is primary. All are important. My guess, considering Apple’s edgy styling and innovation, that “visionary” is Job’s primary talent and that talent has been **honed by experience** into a core strength that keeps his company ahead of competition.

If you don’t know what you do best, ask your friends, your relatives, your brothers and sisters, and your parents. You might read the popular book, *Discover your Strengths*, and take a Web-based interactive test developed by the Gallup Organization. This test will identify your top-five inborn talents. Once found, select the one that excites you the most. Use it to build on. Let it morph into something specific. Use it to master a skill and make that your claim to fame.

Back in high school, a friend of mine was famous for running the 440, and those who knew him in high school and college associated the number “440” with him the rest of his life. For years, I corresponded with him at Stu440@aol.com. The ability to run fast was a talent Stuart Johnson was born with, but it took his innate **quiet determination and inner discipline** to hone that talent and make him a champion. In business, **discipline and determination** helped him race from trainee to chief executive. He gave back to the sport that influenced his life by contributing the money to build the new outdoor track at Virginia Tech.

Your unique skill may even earn you a nickname as it did for “Cool Hand” Luke, or “Calamity” Jane, or “Iceman” George Gervan, who played for the Spurs and Chicago Bulls.

When you go on a job interview, having a clear sense of what your brand is and what it offers others will give you inner strength and radiate the confidence you need to succeed—to succeed not only in that first interview but in the whole of life.

Let me close with the example of my own experience. Since I was a little kid and my father gave me a book called, “*Fun with a Pencil*,” I’ve had a passion for drawing. For me, art was a natural talent and that, along with a love of words, led me to choose advertising as a career. Like you, when I graduated, I faced an uncertain economy and jobs were scarce. I went to a half-dozen ad agencies and they turned me down. “Get some experience,” I was told.

How do you do that without a job?

As it turned out, I used my art and writing inclinations to get a job at a ridiculously low salary at a weekly newspaper where I drew editorial cartoons, sold and laid out ads, and wrote articles and news items. Armed with some experience I got an ad agency job, and then, a few years later, I started my own firm. I did not seek to become an advertising artist. But I used my **passion for art, writing, style and ideas** to influence the direction of the agency I founded. These traits evolved into the core strength of **“creativity,” that magical blending of design, words, images, storytelling, and sound to achieve strategic marketing goals.** This is the heart of The Martin Agency, it has never diverted from that core strength.

Best of all, I found that when your core strength is being utilized every day, the job isn’t work. And the money follows a job well done.

If you take nothing else from what I say today, remember to identify your special talent and find a job that utilizes it. Hone it into a specific skill, and make that skill your claim-to-fame. Money is secondary, but it will come.

Not everyone with a job is happy with what he or she is doing. According to a recent Gallup survey of 1.7 million people around the world, eight out of ten men and women today feel miscast in their roles at work because their talents are not being used effectively.

Set your sights on finding a job where your talents are put into play.

When you do that, you'll not only be satisfied and rewarded. You will love to get up and go to work every morning—even on Mondays.

So, for a few minutes today, think of yourself as a freshly-minted brand venturing out into the marketplace--out where you will market yourself, your ideas, and use your core strength to help future employers become even more successful.

* * * * *