



## Who Controls Your Brand? The same people who control your destiny.

EARLIER THIS MONTH the boxing world lost a legend when Joe Frazier, the first man to defeat Muhammad Ali, died of liver cancer at age 67. Frazier, an Olympic and undisputed world heavyweight champion, did more than beat “The Greatest;” he was instrumental in the creation of brand Ali through their epic trilogy of bouts in the 1970s. And likewise, Ali helped create the brand “Smokin’ Joe.”

It’s indisputable that Ali could “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,” and had a knack for feeding the media’s hungers. But neither he nor Joe was “in control” of his brand. The boxing relationships were mutual, not causal. Everyone was in it together, for themselves: the fighters, the fans, the reporters, the promoters, the networks, even the Black Muslims co-created their realities and their reputations (whether they were aware of it or not).

In the same way, organizations are not in control of their brands. And neither are consumers. No one is in control. The idea of being in control implies that the future is predictable. But future events are not passive to past events. The future unfolds like an improvisational performance. You can play a part, but you don’t write the plot. Despite today’s growing obsession with data and measurement, the marketplace is not a predictable process. It’s a dance.

Unfortunately, many leaders continue to respond to our complex, rapidly changing and increasing uncertain times with simplistic, cause-and-effect

thinking and actions. Instead of embracing the hearts and minds of intelligent, self-interested and socially influenced human beings, they anxiously attempt to cause success to happen through a hodgepodge of uninspiring techniques and tactics. Doing what’s vital, challenging, and remarkable has been replaced by a dispassionate calculus of consequences.

Great leaders understand the distinctions of today’s tumultuous marketplace. They’ve given up the need to control events, have come to terms with their fears and egos, and are dedicated to adding value and happiness to people’s lives. They inspire. They embrace change. They accept the uncertainty of the future. They trust people and help them live their dreams. By giving up the idea of control, they end up with the kind of relationships they really want; trusting and mutually beneficial ones. They move from the illusion of persuasive power to the reality of collaborative creation.

Charles F. Keating wrote, “A problem well stated is a problem half solved.” *Who controls the brand?* isn’t a problem well stated. In fact, it isn’t a problem at all. For inquisitive types, it’s a rhetorical question to help ponder the nature of success in today’s chaotic marketplace. For everyone else, it’s a distraction. Business and work are not problems to be solved; they’re integral parts of our evolving stories. Success is not knowing how everything happens and then attempting to control it. Success is being inspired by something, and then flat out doing it.