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**BE YOURSELF, BUT  
MORE SO**



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**J**amie Oliver is a TV presenter with a big and likeable personality, but he is a lot more than that. Building on the success of his television shows he has established himself as powerful and bankable brand.

You won't have to venture very far out into the world before you encounter 'Oliver the brand'. Pop into the newsagent and you'll find him sitting prominently among the food and lifestyle titles, smiling from the cover of his own magazine. Take a short walk to the supermarket or local deli and you'll see his face or his personal messages adorning the labels of pasta sauce and packs of fresh herbs. Duck into the hardware shop and you could well find yourself tempted by the Tefal range of Oliver-inspired kitchenware. And depending on where you live you might end your day with a meal in one of his restaurants. Of course, you might stay at home and watch TV. The chances are you'll see him endorsing Sainsbury's supermarket in an advert or fronting one of his shows.

So where does 'Oliver the man' end and 'Oliver the brand' begin? That's actually quite a tough question. Oliver's business success is based on his own personality. His persona shone forth when he first appeared on TV in *The Naked Chef*. Love him or hate him, you couldn't ignore him – he was a TV natural.

But the character of *The Naked Chef* was giving us something more than one man's big personality. The show was first aired on BBC2, a channel that took lifestyle very seriously at the end of the 1990s. From home makeover shows and gardening through to recipe series fronted by personalities, the channel reflected Britain's growing obsession with the domestic challenge of living stylishly and well.

And *The Naked Chef* was certainly about the lifestyle. Oliver fronted the show from a trendy London flat that appeared to be populated



by relatives and easy-on-the-eye friends. Later, when he moved to Channel 4, Oliver would repeat this ‘fly-on-the-wall’ style trick with *Jamie at Home*. This time his retreat was a bucolic idyll in the English countryside, replete with vegetable garden, chickens and its own pizza ovens.

**Oliver’s business success is based on his own personality**

Meanwhile, projects such as *Jamie’s Kitchen*, *Jamie’s School Dinners* and *Jamie’s Ministry of Food* have cemented Oliver’s position as a campaigner for higher food standards. He is seen as someone who is cool, authentic, honest and committed. It’s a persona that the public buy into not only via his television work but also through the products that bear his name.

Oliver’s successful exploitation of his own brand echoes that of Britain’s best known entrepreneur, Richard Branson. Like Oliver, Branson enjoys something of a personality cult. From his buccaneering challenge to British Airways’ long haul business to his much publicized round-the-world ballooning efforts, he has fixed himself in the public imagination as a ‘can do’ adventurer who is always ready to take on industry’s big hitters and offer better value to the public in the process. Like Oliver, he is unstuffy and is good at communicating with his market. Generally speaking he is well-liked and trusted, and the businesses he runs always seem to be just a bit ‘cooler’ than the competition.

But there are major differences. When Branson began his business career, he was marketing a student newspaper and later selling cut price records by mail order under the Virgin brand. The teenagers who lapped up the discounts on the records neither knew nor cared who Branson was. They did know the name Virgin, though. Today – even though Branson is a household name – his compa-



ny's brand is still Virgin. Yes, Branson's personality enhances his appeal and his approach to business is inextricably associated with the appeal of the white V on a red background, but if the founder were to fall under a bus tomorrow the brand and all the values associated with it would survive, at least for a time.

**Oliver proved himself a TV natural, not least because he could mix ingredients and talk simultaneously**

In contrast Oliver is a personal brand. The TV shows, the cookbooks, the DVDs, the kitchenware and the herbs sell under his own name. If he fell victim to the same bus, a significant part of his business would lose the motor that drives its sales. And for that reason, Oliver must continue to develop and refresh that brand while keeping himself in the public eye.

## CREATE AN IMAGE

The first step for Jamie Oliver was the creation of his TV persona. It has to be stressed that Oliver's personality was not manufactured for the audience. Biographers agree that he was a 'mouthy', cheeky child who grew up to be a not dissimilar adult. Thanks in part to his upbringing in an Essex pub, he had confidence and social skills in abundance. That confidence wasn't shaken by a poor academic performance in school. After all, his love of food had given him a career path that was in no way dependent on academic qualifications. He knew he could do well by working hard and working in an industry that he loved.

Realistically, he could have hoped to work his way up through the kitchens and make a decent living as a head chef, perhaps even



starting his own restaurant someday. Happily for Oliver – and all of those who now rely on his activities for gainful employment – he found himself working in the kitchens of London’s River Café Restaurant at a time when a TV crew were making a documentary.

Although unschooled in the dark arts of broadcasting, Oliver proved himself a TV natural, not least because he could mix ingredients and talk simultaneously. More important perhaps, he retained his personality in front of the camera. As Oliver recalled on his website, his contribution to the show drew an instant response. ‘The day after the programme was shown, I got calls from five production companies all wanting to talk about a possible show. I couldn’t believe it and thought it was my mates winding me up!’<sup>1</sup>

One of those who made contact was Pat Llewellyn, a producer at Optomen Television. Oliver was asked to test for his own series. This was when the Oliver personal brand was born.

The trick that Oliver pulls off so effortlessly is that his appearances on TV seem totally natural and as uncontrived as his recipes. You take a set – in the case of *The Naked Chef*, Oliver’s own flat – add a tousle-headed mouthy presenter, allow him to address the camera for half an hour and hey presto, you have a ‘pukka’ TV show! It looked as easy as mixing these basic ingredients. Oliver wanted to show that it was possible to make good meals without having to splash out on expensive ingredients or gadgets. In fact a lot of time, effort and skill went into ensuring that the ingredients worked. Famously, the pilot show by Optemon TV for the BBC was a failure. Oliver spoke directly to camera in affected tones. It seemed stilted and unnatural.



From that low point, the winning format was developed. Oliver was determined to be himself, preparing and serving dishes for friends and relations. As he put together the recipe he entered into a dialogue with the producer off-camera. The show was buzzing with life and energy. As Oliver described it, most of the cooking was done in real time and rather than reading from an autocue, Oliver delivered his recipes unscripted and in his own style, and distinctive accent and vocabulary.

Oliver was being true to himself – starring in a non-elitist food programme aimed as much at Dagenham as it was at Hampstead or the Cotswolds. But there was plenty of TV artifice at work too. A rapidly moving camera followed Oliver as he worked, giving the series a sense of energy and a stylistic look pioneered by ‘youth’ TV in the 1980s.

The flat in which the series was shot was Oliver’s own, but it had been acquired shortly before the series commenced, as his previous residence was considered too small and cramped to host a series that served up the London good life alongside food.<sup>2</sup>

His new flat was ideal, but there was one problem. The Jamie Oliver of *The Naked Chef* lived in a bachelor pad. The Jamie Oliver who inhabited the real world shared his flat with long-term girlfriend Jools. For the time being at least his partner had to pretend to be living elsewhere. It was reminiscent of the careful image making that goes on around pop stars: relationships are permitted but only if they enhance and reinforce the public image.

One of the signature features of *The Naked Chef* was the spiral staircase that linked Oliver to the world outside it. Epitomizing youth and energy, he would slide down the stairs, jump on his scooter and investigate the world outside. To the casual viewer it looked



as if his neighbourhood was awash with trendy delis, fresh markets and purveyors of high quality products. In fact, the production company searched far and wide across London for food stores that would fit the image of the show. There was no attempt at fakery, and the only thing that wasn't quite as it seemed was that the shops were not all local. From a scattered community of suppliers, the producers were creating a 'foodie' London of the imagination. A place much trendier and better served than the real city.

Perhaps this is what really marks the border between 'Oliver the man' and 'Oliver the television personality'. In *The Naked Chef* he succeeded in being himself, thanks to the camera work and Oliver's own ebullient personality. The series had an edge and energy that was largely absent elsewhere in the TV cookery universe. But like just about everything on TV, what we were really looking at was 'hyper reality'.

## TICKING THE BOXES

By this stage Oliver was well on the way to creating an extremely bankable personal brand. So what does that actually mean?

All of us – in one way or another – have what consultants would call a 'personal brand'. At its simplest, it is how we are perceived, whether in the workplace or in the wider world. In a professional context that perception can affect our promotion chances or the type of work that lands on our desk.

A key word here is *perception*. Some people are very good at branding themselves. They aspire to playing a certain role within an organization and set about demonstrating to all those around



them that they are more than capable of fulfilling it. In other words, they package themselves for the role they intend to play.

Personal branding is equally important when you're seeking to win business – either as a customer-facing agent for an organization or a self-employed person on the hunt for customers. Potential customers will look not only at the product or service on offer, but also at the seller. Is he or she honest? Capable? A suitable long-term business partner? Likely to provide the best deal? Reliable? All these factors can make or break a sale.

And while the high-profile life of Jamie Oliver may appear to be a million miles removed from the day-to-day realities of those who don't happen to be celebrities, his success in building a marketable personal brand has lessons for just about everyone who has to make a living.

## THE REAL DEAL

The key component in personal brand building is *authenticity*. Love him, like him or loathe him, Oliver has been determinedly his own man from day one of his TV career. The Essex slang and accent may seem overcooked at times but his personality on camera is more than a recognizable match with his off-screen presence.

Take this encounter, described by Simon Hattenstone in a profile of Oliver for *The Guardian* newspaper. During a photo shoot outside his restaurant, the chef is passed by a postman on his rounds. On seeing Oliver, the postman is reminded that he needs to buy some food and says so. When Oliver offers to feed him, the postman



comments that he shouldn't because he's putting on weight, to which Oliver replies, 'Well, deliver that post a bit quicker and you'll lose some.'<sup>3</sup>

It's an unscripted exchange that could easily have taken place on one of Oliver's TV shows. It's a demonstration of how his screen persona is a natural extension of his real self. That's how he works his magic. Had the production company stuck with the format of the stilted pilot episode of *The Naked Chef*, the chances are the world would not have fallen for the charms of the real Jamie Oliver.

The same rules apply to establishing any personal brand. First and foremost, adopt a style that sits naturally on your shoulders. If you're naturally extrovert – the life and soul of any party – that's your foundation. If you're quiet but authoritative, play to that particular strength. Adopt a persona that isn't you and the chances are it won't be long before the rest of the world sees through it.

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Hand in hand with authenticity is *consistency*. Over the years Oliver has evolved his brand by branching out from cookery programmes to create compelling shows about animal welfare or training unemployed teenagers to work in the county's best restaurants. But throughout that evolution, Oliver has remained a remarkably consistent character. As a public figure, he's talked about the pub-owning parents who inspired him, the chefs who mentored him and the love of food that has helped transform him from school failure to multi-millionaire. In other words, we pretty much know who he is and what drives him.



Again, the rules of personal branding apply far beyond the TV studio. Once people know who you are and what you stand for, you tamper with that perception at your peril.

## MAKE YOURSELF VISIBLE

In the first instance, Oliver got lucky. In a parallel universe, if he hadn't been in the right place at the right time when a camera crew arrived at the River Café Restaurant, he could well be working anonymously in a restaurant kitchen somewhere. Doubtless he'd be doing good work and may even own the restaurant, but the Oliver brand as we know it wouldn't exist.

Part of his success has been down to his willingness to court publicity and put a significant portion of his private life into the public arena. His openness in talking about his family background has helped shape our opinion of him as an honest, hard working, ambitious and driven young man who has pulled himself up through energy and an applied love of food. His decision to include relatives, friends and partner Jools in his first TV series cemented our perception of a man whose love of food sat hand in hand with a commitment to family.

Later, depictions of family life showed more strains. In both *Jamie's Kitchen* – a series following Oliver's attempts to mould a group of unemployed teenagers into chefs – Jools reacted angrily to her husband's dedication to work at the expense of his family. Then in the celebrated *Jamie's School Dinners* series Jools was filmed crying on screen following national newspaper allegations that Oliver was having an affair with a waitress, which he publicly denied.



By that stage Oliver owned the production company that made his programmes. He has maintained that the editorial decisions were in the hands of his producers. That said, you can only assume that any serious objections on his part would have resulted in the scenes being cut.

**Oliver knows how to get a headline while instinctively staying on the right side of the cheeky/charming versus objectionable divide**

Times have changed though. In September 2009, he told the *Mail on Sunday*, 'Jools has said "I'm not doing any more telly, because every time I'm on, I cry or b\*\*\*\*\* you." We're just a normal couple'.<sup>4</sup>

These days his life is probably less of a public drama, but Oliver knows how to get a headline while instinctively staying on the right side of the cheeky/charming versus objectionable divide. It's a talent that has helped keep him in the public eye.

As such, his business career has been built on the marketing/public relations principles that a major corporation would recognize. You create your brand, ensure it is consistent and get out into the public arena by the most effective means possible. It's a principle that applies equally well to anyone in a working situation. If you're doing a good job, exhibit a particular strength or have a good story to tell, then show the world.

## **ADDING THE BEEF**

Which is not to say that creating a personal brand is entirely a matter of identifying positive aspects of your personality, arranging



them on a plate and serving to a grateful audience. As any management consultant will tell you, a successful brand requires style but needs substance.

Behind the Essex vowel sounds, the Oliver brand delivered plenty in the way of substance from day one. Firstly, he clearly knew his stuff when it came to food. He had, after all, trained at some of London's best known restaurants with a view to ultimately becoming a head chef. Purists often blanched at Oliver's apparently casual way of mixing ingredients, but he was a trained professional who knew exactly what he was doing.

As his career developed, so did Oliver the man: 'I was uncomfortable with the success the public had given me. I felt obliged to give something back,' he told the *Mail on Sunday*.<sup>5</sup>

That 'something' was the Fifteen Restaurant – set up to train unemployed and disadvantaged teenagers – and the TV series that charted its progress. From that point on, Oliver took on a more serious mantle, that of a much deeper man with definite ideas that extended beyond food. Here was someone who was also concerned about fairness and society.

## NETWORK NEWS

Oliver has also proved adept at pressing-the-flesh. Thanks to the international success of *The Naked Chef* he quickly had an address book full of celebrity acquaintances, including the (then) 'royal' film star couple, Brad Pitt and Jennifer Anniston. As time went by the speed dial on his phone extended to include the great and



good of the political world. Following the *Jamie's School Dinners* series he spent time with Tony Blair, various members of the Cabinet and the then shadow Prime Minister, Michael Howard. On the international stage, he was hired by Prime Minister Gordon Brown to cook for the G20 leaders when they met in London to discuss ways and means to avert a banking crisis and steer the world out of recession.

The celebrity connections had a mixed impact on Brand Oliver. During his darkest hours – the period during which the BBC did not recommission *The Naked Chef* and Channel 4 picking up on *Jamie's Kitchen* – critics with an axe to grind would often compare and contrast the 'man of the people' persona projected by Oliver with the reality of his newly gilded, jet set life.

Those critics were largely silenced by the emergence of a second-generation, campaigning Oliver. By then, he was demonstrating his ability to change things and achieve good in the world, so few people lost sleep at the thought of him schmoozing with Brad and Jennifer or chewing the fat with Tom Cruise. Meanwhile the heavyweight contacts simply enhanced his new heavyweight image. Here was a man who could meet and discuss serious issues with prime ministers and business leaders.

Equally important, his contact list gave him the clout he needed to achieve his goals.

## **MAKING A PACKET**

These days, Oliver is about much more than TV shows and tie-in books and DVDs. He has numerous successful businesses that sell



real products in the rough, tough commercial world of the high street.

The jump from celebrity and author to the face on the label of a product isn't necessarily an easy one to make. As a TV personality, Oliver established himself as authentic and passionate about food (and just about everything associated with it). He was also trusted by a public who valued his insistence on using the best possible ingredients, responsibly sourced. As such, he was (and is) an ideal figurehead for a range of businesses from restaurants to cooking sauces.

But the question that anyone in Oliver's position has to ask is 'how best do I take the brand values that I've established as a TV presenter and apply them to products on sale on a supermarket shelf?'

The answer, in the case of his supermarket range of herbs and sauces, has been to retain the apparent intimacy and informality of his relationship with the TV audience. Working with brand consultancy The Plant, Oliver has developed a set of brand guide-

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lines for the products he creates, designs and/or endorses. He even has his own 'brand bible'. In the case of 'Jamie Oliver foods', the guidelines manifest themselves as 'personal messages from Jamie' rather than conventional labels. As on TV, Oliver is talking to you, not at you.

A personal message from the founder is by no means a new concept. Who can forget the cheesy splendour of the late Victor



Kiam, owner of Remington, declaring 'I liked the shaver so much I bought the company' on ad slots? Today that type of ad is probably too redolent of US-style hard sell to impress many British consumers, but there have been plenty of more subtle variations on the theme.

Witness the appeal of Boden clothes. The mail order company sells a fine range of clothing which appeals to that portion of middle England that hankers after casual English style with a contemporary designer edge. Sales of the company's products have been helped immensely by founder Johnny Boden's commentary on the products as they appear in the company's catalogues. Here is the old Etonian founder presenting his vision directly to customers and it works a treat.

Witness, too, the clever branding of Innocent drinks. Here is a company founded on the belief that UK consumers would flock to buy fruit smoothies that were both delicious and nutritious. The selling point is natural product. Whether selling juices, smoothies, ice cream and (latterly) ready meals the company prides itself on the absence of artificial ingredients. The company also embraces ethical trading. Again, the use of apparently personal messages on the packaging, which speak directly to the consumer, are an important component in the marketing mix and enhance the company's profile as one run by enthusiastic young people, rather than a faceless conglomerate.

This kind of marketing suits Oliver's personal brand down to the ground and in addition to label design, his communication skills are harnessed through video messages and editorial both on his websites and those of the companies he partners with.



In doing so, he has succeeded in taking his original brand values – essentially those of the presenter and showman – and harnessed them to commercial marketing campaigns.

## THE BRAND'S THE THING

Brought up in the 'can do' eighties and nineties, Jamie Oliver is confident, brash and possessed of a tongue that can be sharp, witty and raw in equal measure. Those are attributes he shares with millions of other working and lower middle class kids but unlike the overwhelming majority, he's created a marketable, bankable brand that he uses to sell himself and a range of products. This is how he did it:

- **Get a lucky break.** Oliver was undoubtedly lucky. But for an appearance on a TV documentary – *Christmas at The River Café* – he would well have languished in relatively prosperous obscurity had he made his way through the hierarchy of restaurant life.
- **Get the formula right.** Once discovered by a TV production company, Oliver worked with his new mentors to create a television series with a style that would complement and bring out the best from his own personality.
- **Play to your strengths.** Oliver used his lifestyle – that of a young ambitious Londoner – and created a heightened version of it for a programme. It wasn't all about scooters and spiral staircases. By cooking for family and friends, he hammered home his message that meals were an important social experience. These elements attracted a broad constituency of viewers from middle England to inner-city urban.



- **Be consistent.** Oliver's personality and brand have changed over time but it has been evolution rather than revolution. The passions that drive him today – love of food and a belief that the good life is to be enjoyed by everyone – were apparent in his early interviews and TV programmes.
- **Give substance to the brand.** Oliver was a trained chef and despite his casual approach to cooking his culinary knowledge was clearly extensive.
- **Stay visible.** By staying in the public eye Oliver broadened his appeal.
- **Leverage your brand values.** Once his career as a TV presenter was established, Oliver branched out into food products, kitchenware and a range of other ventures. While the commercial ventures are separate from his TV work, he has successfully applied the same brand values to both.

