



C H A P T E R O N E

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In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

FROM A DISTANCE HE LOOKED EVEN SMALLER. A man in late middle-age, wrapped in blue polyester, Bill Oncken punched at the air as he made his way down the aisle. He moved half as rapidly as he spoke, spittle spraying on those who thought they had grabbed good getaway seats.

With each stab into the air, he made a point, some more important than others but each stamped with equal ferocity as he punched and spat his way closer to me.

I was enthralled. We were in the presence of a great thinker. Well, at least a clear and solid thinker with ideas so plain that the world had missed them, or dismissed them, until he was forced to fight back with those stubby ever-waving arms.

I have never seen a man perspire so. There, in an over air-conditioned ballroom of the San Antonio Marriott Riverwalk, a man was sweating with more intensity than the brown-skinned city employees laboring in the sweltering south Texas heat just beyond the valet stand.

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They patched Commerce Street with hot stickiness while Oncken, inside, was paving over old ideas of management with simple yet powerful thoughts that stuck in my mind and wiped across my yellow legal pad.

Oncken sweated through his blue polyester shirt, leaving rings of salt with each wave of effort. A miniature salt flat had formed under each arm. An old-fashioned, even for the times, lavalier mic dangled from a cord around his neck making an annoying scratch with each step through the audience. Oncken dragged the cord like a ball and chain.

In front of me to the left of the sweating, untouched pitcher of hotel water, a Radio Shack cassette recorder that weighed less than the battery set, wrapped each and every word around the tape spools. There were the words I would take home and listen to again and again until I could do Oncken's bit by heart and mean it.

But the most curious thing the old man said that day was this:

Lesson One **In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.**

Such a simple, maybe silly thought. But oh, the power! Like the force of tides or compound interest, there stood little man Oncken in a pool of sweat and spit and ideas with the one idea that has made fortunes, yet was too simple, too easy to reflect on the radar screens.

To borrow a little more from my management hero, Oncken also said, "It's hell working for a nervous boss, especially when you are the one making him nervous!" What Oncken wanted us to understand is that in business and in life, priorities are not always obvious. Sometimes, in Oncken's words, you have to "put the urgent ahead of the important."

That day in San Antonio Oncken added that standing out was a matter of knowing what is urgent and what is merely important. And I can tell you there is only one arbiter of what is urgent—the boss.

George Weyerhaeuser, the paper magnate, said, "For every problem besetting this company, there will always be a responsible person, and it will never be George Weyerhaeuser. Now, what can I do for you?"

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Do what the boss wants first so you can be around long enough to do what is best for the company.

Here is what is best for you and the company: You have to know exactly who you are and where you are going. As you read on, we will create a road map for discovering and growing your powerful, personal, highly targeted MicroBrand.

In business, the two most important things to know are:

- ❶ What the customer wants.
- ❷ What you are going to do about it.

(New scene. Twenty-five years later.)

Now, my hair is silver like Oncken's and I sit with Buns, my wife, partner, and best friend on the entire planet. We are the lone occupants of the Burger Basket. I guess to be certain that I have it correct and that Vicki stamps my frequent customer card I should say we were in Doris's Burger Basket, Highway 27, Center Point, Texas. It's a cold and drizzly Saturday evening. Figuring that we are likely to be the last customers of the day, we prop our feet near the gas burning heater.

"Hello, Mr. Gross."

The voice belonged to a young man with dark eyes and an equally dark countenance. A cold draft helped to announce the newcomer as the wooden door scraped shut too late to keep out the weather.

"Hi! Nice to see you." (I had no idea who he was, but he was happy to see me, which is always a good sign. And, since this happens pretty regularly to me, I gave it my best fake and hoped that he would give up a clue as I struggled to place him—at least in context if not enough to recall his name.)

"I'm reading your book. It's pretty good. I'm about half way through."

From here, it's usually easy. I just ask which book and what he liked about it. I follow up with a little polite conversation, while I struggle to figure from where I might know him.

But he wasn't cutting me any slack.

"You were right," the stranger dove in before I had time to recover.

I wondered what someone in Center Point would be doing reading one of my books. I live here and I love this place, but, well, let's say that I don't have high expectations.

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“It was a febrile seizure.”

Finally, I made the connection. I knew him. I even knew his address. And I remembered holding his infant son.

It had been a hot summer afternoon. The sun had yet to set, but in the modest neighborhood where they lived, the sun was hiding behind the trees that run along the river. Long, cooling shadows laced the small front yard but had yet to begin their work.

Buns and I had been working on dinner, something simple like you always do when the day has been a scorcher. When the pager went off, we pushed the food to the center of the cooking island so as not to tempt the dog.

Buns grabbed the cell phone and had dispatch on the line before I had the 4Runner at the gate. I was knee deep in conversation with the dispatcher before the dust from our road settled on the asphalt of Highway 480. When we are home, I work as a volunteer EMT, where I'm at the bottom of the medical barrel but often the first line of response in nearly four hundred square miles of rural Texas Hill Country.

“Scott Gross, Center Point first responder. I'm en route. What can you tell me?”

“Two-and-a-half-year-old child in seizure. Parents are distraught. Be careful.”

When I jerked the SUV to a stop, a worried father (now standing at our table at the Burger Basket and motioning to the waitress that he was here for his carry-out order) was motioning me into the house.

It was a case of febrile seizure. A little oxygen, cool them mechanically, guard the airway, and wait. That's all there is to it. And luckily for me, I had just read about this type of medical emergency in *EMS Magazine* (emsmagazine.com) a couple of days earlier.

Memories came flooding back, and I smiled at the man. “Yeah, I remember. Cute little guy. Looked just like his dad.”

The man didn't return the smile. “What you didn't know, Mr. Gross, (I will always be uncomfortable with the Mister) was that when you got there that night, my wife and I had decided to break up. We had been arguing about how to go about it, who gets what, and about our son.”

I had nothing to say.

“Well, when you showed up and seemed to love our son absolutely,

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we were a little embarrassed. We got to thinking that if a total stranger could love our son like that, maybe we should do the same.” I waited for him to continue. “So we didn’t break up and things are pretty good. I guess I should just say thank you.”

Then the smiles came, one from each of us, and they felt great.

Lesson Two

You never know when you are going to touch someone in an important way.

So. I am about to tell you how you can stand out in a cluttered world. The lessons will be simple, but they will also be powerful. As Obi-Wan Kenobi might say, use these lessons wisely because you never know how they might change your life or even the life of someone you don’t yet know.

What Do You Bring to the Party?

You have to have three things to develop a killer brand:

- You must have *something that is unique* or that could be made unique.
- You must be *able to articulate that uniqueness well*.
- You must be *relentless in making multiple, quality impressions*.

MicroBranding Point

What are you already doing that makes you stand out?

What skills, talents, or experiences could you put to work to make you stand out? Who are you touching with your brand?

Everybody Has One

Everybody has a brand. They just don’t know what to do with it. No matter whether your brand is Wal-Mart; Fred Smith, CEO; Juanita Gomez, director of training; neighbor; honey; or Mom—you have a brand.