

Executive 2.0

Executive branding - what can we learn from the great executive examples?

When it comes to executive branding, there are few examples of international acting executives that compare to Neelie Kroes. She has been an incredible example of someone with a consistent and successful executive brand. Her high profile, influential business and political career spans decades. She has made Forbes' "The World's 100 Most Powerful Women" list a total of five times and she remains an international advocate for the position of women in the tech industry and female entrepreneurship.

Over the course of her diverse career, Kroes has driven change that continues to benefit us all. She has advanced industries from transport to telecoms, challenged corporate giants and saved Europe's single market. With vast board level experience at companies including Volvo and Uber, the depth and quality of her network firmly reinforces her respected personal brand.



Kroes and the 4 essential building blocks of executive branding

I define the construction of personal and executive branding as made up of four key building blocks: behaviour, outside image, tone of voice and key messages.

Kroes has shaped these building blocks to create a lasting foundation for her consistent presentation as a reliable, focused political player and strong defender of people's rights in the digital and telecoms industries.

Behaviour: boldly driving change

Kroes' values are always recognisable in her behaviour. If you look at her extraordinary achievements, you can see that she has always behaved in a strict, straightforward, strong and predictable manner. When she was appointed as the Dutch government's candidate for European Competition Commissioner in 2004, former Competition Commissioner Karel Van Miert described Kroes' approach as "pragmatic, energetic and determined".

For 10 years, she worked as an antitrust advocate in the European Digital Agenda. It was Kroes who successfully challenged Microsoft and Google. The Wall Street Journal described her behaviour and approach to Microsoft as "tough" and said she, "has emerged as arguably the world's most-feared antitrust enforcer." The EU Microsoft Competition case changed the market but also influenced Microsoft's decision to invest in interoperability.

As a board advisor at Uber, Kroes was instrumental in the departure of former CEO and founder, Travis Kalanick, following a series of privacy scandals and complaints of discrimination and sexual harassment at the company. Kroes readdressed the balance, demonstrating her unwavering leadership skills and her value of fairness.

Outside image: strong, sharp and steeped in style

Kroes cares about the businesses and politics she has dedicated her life to and this is consistent with her outside image. She has demonstrated that attractiveness is irrelevant but looking like you care is essential.



Kroes is always well dressed and discreetly stylish – her approach is simple but effective. If you are a leader, male or female, this is a professional and fitting type of image to portray.

A more contemporary example is Lady Gaga, who continuously cultivates her highly respected personal brand.

Her performance and appearance at President Biden's inauguration embodied how she can adapt to an environment while retaining her image as an extreme dresser, fantastic show person and firm supporter of charity and human rights.

Outside image is also about the people who stand with you. Kroes has built a robust team in the EU and is extremely well networked in both politics and among leaders of the technology industry. At a digital technology conference in Amsterdam, she was supported by Tim Cook from Apple, the CEO of Uber, Dara Khosrowshahi, the CEO of Spotify, Daniel Ek and Facebook VP, Joel Kaplan. They all were there, because of her.

Tone of voice: straight-talking and inspirational

Kroes is known for being a skilful negotiator and powerful speaker. Her approach is always to the point, concise, focused and polite. She can strike a balance between the reassurance of a friendly smile and the firmness of straight talking to tackle important issues and negotiate successful outcomes.

We are still benefiting from many of Kroes' negotiations. That we can travel in Europe and not pay roaming fees for our mobile phones, is thanks to Kroes. She believed that if we are one community, we should be free to travel and not pay extra just to use our mobile phones – and her conveyance of this message brought about real change.

Key messages: strive for a better future

Kroes is an advocate for honesty and equality and her key messages are clear: she believes in fair principles and using technology to improve yourself.



She has led technology in our daily lives and stimulated innovation. She is highly effective in the big university innovation programmes, especially in her input with young people.

While Kroes is in the middle of political and business life, there is a handle of moderation to her executive branding – she is not continuously appearing on TV, but rather steers away from media hype and a manufactured image, and towards authenticity and trust.

Kroes has never spoken about her personal brand, but her messages are unmistakable – she knew what she wanted people to think and has worked hard to shape that brand.

From carefully constructed imagery depicting her strength and influence, to her professionally crafted wardrobe, to conveying her authentic beliefs and messaging, Kroes has consciously shaped the four building blocks to construct a personal brand that is subconsciously influential and genuinely representative of who she is.

Looking to learn more? [Get in touch with me](#) to start consciously refining your executive or personal branding - and bring your way forward into focus.

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