

“Don and Fran have mastered the art of leading with purpose, values, and story. . . and now they’re giving you the playbook.” —**Larry Weber**
Chairman and CEO of Racepoint Global and Founder of Weber Shandwick

HOW TO LEAD A VALUES-BASED PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FIRM



3 Keys to Unlock Purpose and Profit
DON SCALES & FRAN BIDERMAN GROSS

WILEY

Introduction

Twenty or thirty years ago, businesses did not think about why they sold the services or products they did. Business owners and C-level executives did not give much thought, if any, to their firms' beliefs and values. Conventional wisdom at the time was simply "we provide a service to our clients in a professional manner, and they pay us accordingly." Profits were determined by how effectively and efficiently executives ran the firm. Until now, there was none better at explaining all this to us than David Maister in his seminal work, *Managing the Professional Service Firm*.

From a management standpoint, those practices are still valid, and no one was more respected than Maister, but there is a missing strategic piece: *brand foundation*. While running a business in the 21st century, particularly with regard to brand and culture, we find a drastically different world since Maister's work—for companies, employees, and customers. People want to know what you stand for and what you believe in, because it is no longer enough to work with a firm that offers excellent services; clients want to work with firms which align with their own beliefs and values. Customers want more than a transaction; they seek conversation and collaboration. Like any leader of a professional services firm, you probably focus on growth goals, increased sales, and streamlined efficiencies to increase profitability. We offer a different perspective: if you shift your focus to running a purpose-led, values-based company, all those things fall into strategic alignment at an expedited pace.

To be clear, in order to thrive in the 21st century, you must run all aspects of your business through the lens of your brand foundation. We will teach you how to lead from this lens, but first, we are going to talk about something nobody tends to talk about when first growing their company: how imperative it is to understand what your company believes in and why it was created. Do this and you have a chance. Do not do this and you will be building the company in proverbial quicksand, and it will become increasingly harder to lead your employees and clients as the business scales.

Maybe you would like to know who we are and why you should listen to us? Let's get that established first!

Half a Century of Combined Experience

We have decades of experience between us across numerous industries. I (Don) have led professional service firms for thirty-five years, in all shapes and sizes, and you will hear about my various experiences throughout the book. I did not always use the terminology “Three Keys,” but knowing what my company does and why it exists has been the differentiator to my consistent success. After years of reflecting on how I got to where I was, in 2018, I discovered a hidden framework I had been executing all along without even realizing it. And, that is where Fran comes in—she has developed a reliable, repeatable framework for understanding what your company does and why establishing your Three Keys anchors all long-term, scalable success. She helped me see clearly what I had been doing, and I—no, we—want you to see the path forward clearly, too. Don't get me wrong. Ultimately, I would have been successful with my approach all alone. But Fran's approach supercharged the direction I was headed via Three Keys: purpose, values, and story. The keys gave me a new, different perspective on how to look at myself, my organization, and my employees. Before Fran, I knew how this stuff worked—by instinct and intuition—but post-Fran I now know how to communicate a

repeatable framework for success that any executive leading a professional services firm will benefit from implementing.

I (Fran) started exploring the question of *why* we do what we do in 2001. I did not have a framework—yet—but instinctively, I understood it wasn't enough for companies just to produce a pretty brochure or logo; the way they communicated to their customers had to have meaning and purpose. After several iterations over four years, I developed a full-circle, 360-degree methodology that starts with purpose and strategically infuses that purpose into the values and story of the organization—hence the Three Keys.

I've been successfully implementing the Three Keys framework inside clients' businesses since 2005. Don was able to reap the benefits across his organization, further and faster than most clients because he had already instinctively internalized the framework before we ever met. When he saw the framework laid out as a strategic process, he understood its value immediately. Don had been executing the framework implicitly all along. I was not just working on the framework for the sake of selling a value-added service; I had been using and iterating the framework inside my own professional services firm, too. Whether you're running a large corporation or an entrepreneurial startup, embrace the Three Keys to anchor your brand foundation—and you will lead your company to faster, long-lasting, and more profitable success.

We're Not in the Business We Think We Are

A bit of background: Currently, I (Don) am CEO of a global digital communication company named Investis Digital. Before I arrived, Investis (as it was named then) was a digital communications company supporting the Investor Relations (IR) and corporate communications communities out of the United Kingdom. In 2014, the company decided to enter the U.S. market, where they were virtually unknown. Historically, the company had worked with publicly held

companies in the U.K. to provide shareholder information on the companies' public websites, and the United States was a relatively new market for them. After two years, they had not gained the significant traction in the United States they had expected, and the board members were growing short on patience.

In 2016, I was brought in as the North American CEO to get their U.S. endeavor on track and to do so profitably. My job had the potential to be either very long-term or extremely short. We struggled in the United States throughout much of 2016, really not understanding what business we were in and how to make money doing it. We made some progress, but not the amount the board and I had expected to. In December 2016, my life at Investis took yet another turn. The board asked me to step into the role of global CEO. Virtually overnight my commute increased from a five-minute, three-block walk to a seven-hour transatlantic flight to London and back twice per month!

After immersing myself inside the global operations at Investis for several months, I was concerned about the direction of the company and how we were to differentiate, especially in the United States. So, I organized a strategy meeting with my extended management team and the board in London to discuss these concerns. As you can imagine, the days leading up to this all-hands-on-deck meeting were extremely stressful. Many senior employees in London had been there for quite some time and had conventional fixed views on what Investis was as a company. My point to everyone was simple: "We need to look at the company in a different way. We are not in the IR business, like most of you think we are. We are not in the corporate communications business, like many of you think we are. If you take a step back and search with a different lens, we are in the content—the storytelling—business." It was true! We helped global clients build meaningful and enduring relationships with their stakeholders through engaging content.

To succeed, we had to adapt to how the world of communications had changed. We needed to think about ourselves as content

specialists. We needed to bolster our content development capabilities and rethink how we optimized content for targeted impact, from how prospective clients found us all the way to how we distributed the content for consumption.

In a somewhat unexpected move to many at the time, I suggested we buy a performance marketing company. In my mind, I knew this strategy would not initially be an easy sell to an already frustrated board of directors. Nonetheless, after I had refocused their hearts and minds on a clear direction, they approached the potential acquisition with an open mind. Once they saw my vision for the synergistic value of performance marketing in conjunction with our existing digital communications capabilities, I received board approval to move forward. Investis acquired ZOG Digital at the end of 2017, and soon after we renamed our combined companies Investis Digital. No one else in the global market has such a unique set of core strategic capabilities. We literally redefined how businesses connected with their audiences online. It was at that precise point that we began to discuss rebranding the company to reflect our new identity and positioning as a single integrated global company.

Rebranding gave us an opportunity to create waves of momentum and energy around the new company's strategic vision, mission, and direction. It was the perfect excuse to reengage with every employee from all of our offices. As a first step, we launched a thirty-day logo competition to see which group could come up with the most compelling design. Each of our three offices—London, New York, and Phoenix—would propose a new logo, and we would get one external proposal as well.

Not Just a Logo

In looking for an external proposal from a branding professional, our head of marketing found Fran and her company, Advantages, through his network. Fran and her team brought a holistic and purposeful

methodology to our new brand called Investis Digital. Just like the office teams, Fran and her team were tasked to design a logo, but Fran had a different approach: she wanted to spend time getting to know us before she put pen to paper. She picked my brain over the course of several calls, asked unconventional questions, looked at all of our previous brand- and culture-related documents, and sparked conversations with people throughout the company. Fran asked the type of questions I asked myself when thinking about the type of company we were and how we wanted to grow market share. She was curious about what we believed in, what we deemed valuable, and very politely challenged what we stood for.

When Fran and her team presented the logo (Figure I.1), I knew it was the winner as soon as I saw it. The logo had personality; it was immersively engaging and uniquely creative. The work that she and her team did provided new layers of meaning and context about the company. In addition to the logo, Fran drafted a compelling story about what Investis Digital stood for—and the story was spot on. It was unanimously clear to the committee that Fran’s logo was the best choice.

I was intrigued: How had she—an outsider—captured our essence so quickly and so accurately? I knew my company because I was on the inside day in and day out. But in just a few short weeks, somehow Fran had codified and elegantly distilled our essence. I wanted to learn how she was able to capture and articulate something seemingly so hard for the rest of my team to grasp. I understood it, but leadership is not about what I understand. In fact, it is about everyone else but me—and here I was, mystified by someone who did not even work for me or with us. The only thought that played on repeat was: “How did she get us, so clearly and so quickly?”

The logo for Investis Digital, featuring the word "investis" in a lowercase, sans-serif font, followed by "digital." in a similar font but with a period at the end. The text is dark gray and centered.

Figure I.1 Investis Digital logo.

I also knew the logo was just the beginning. Investis Digital needed a full-scale rebrand and then we needed to roll out the new brand to our global employees and customers. Based on Advantages' precision workflow and ability to capture what we longed to produce, I knew Fran was the right person to help guide and implement the rebrand of Investis Digital.

Though we were just getting to know each other really well, I had a sense that Fran and I were in alignment on our ideas, and while I was curious, I had no idea what I was really getting into. When you are an engineer like me, you think in a linear fashion. Fran's process is circular, from inside out—which is painful to my instinctive linear sensibility. I went along with her in meeting after meeting, however, because if I was going to do this the right way, I knew the effort of learning to understand what she was doing, and why she was doing it, would pay off a hundredfold. Thankfully throughout the process, Fran was patient with my linear sensitivity, and we were able to find a way to communicate the needs of the business.

The Slog

Working through this process with Fran was tedious, but it led to a whole new understanding of the messaging around our logo and the development of the brand foundation for Investis Digital. Just as importantly, for me it was an eye-opening experience. For starters, Fran's process helped our leadership team to understand the components of our brand foundation through the lens of the Three Keys. We defined our purpose, then began defining our values. It was truly a slog. I always believed that values were an important part of running a professional services firm, but I did not really execute on them in the past. Also, I had seen plenty of mission statements calligraphed on boardroom walls that looked amazing but never went any further. Before Fran, we could repeat our values but we were not really living them. With Fran, we wrote our story to share our purpose and values with our teams, clients, and stakeholders.

I believed we would do the same process I had done in the past: get a rebrand, come up with some values, and write them on the conference room wall. Nothing really different. However, working with Fran was different—in all the right ways. From that day forward we had to walk the walk. Fran showed us why there could be no shortcuts, and no substitutions; it had to be about us totally, fully, and completely. And now, having gone through the process, I can tell you one thing: it was worth every moment of the slog. Fran earned my trust by adapting her approach, working at my pace while strategically moving me along in the process when necessary. She never told me the solution—that is not what her framework does. We created clarity around the Three Keys and then infused them throughout all aspects of our global business.

As I went through this slog, I transformed and so did the business, and as a result the value of the process itself became much clearer. Leaders lead by reflecting on what their organization needs; we needed to look different, sound different, and transform into the company we always had the potential to become—and that started with me as CEO.

In general, most people think about service businesses in terms of billable hours. It is far more than that. At its core, the business is about what you stand for—it is about your purpose, values, and story. You need a vision and a pathway to run a successful professional services firm. This is the only way to create a compelling mission that is a rallying cry for your employees. You need to stand for something by creating a lightning rod and being bold enough to stand by it no matter what. Your company needs an identity, and to have an identity in a hypercompetitive global market requires not just leadership, but courage.

As we continued working with Fran, the company's identity went through multiple iterations, honing and refining the Three Keys until they were razor sharp and precise. When we finally had a compelling working set of the Three Keys, we presented them to the team. They were astounded—we had captured who we are

and what we believed deep in the core of our ethos, individually and collectively! The team's buy-in was the most important step in the process. Only after going through the Three Keys framework with Fran and articulating the clear purpose, values, and story did I realize how much they were the missing strategic piece in our business. In the past, employees would repeat what they saw on the conference room wall, "Embrace Clarity." Their actions may have implicitly reflected them, but our values were not explicitly documented or communicated. Everyone had it in their heads, but it was not lived day in and day out. They neither knew how to recognize the values in their peers nor how to bring those values forward in relationships with customers. But now, everyone in our global business had structure and a common pattern language around what they were doing and why they were doing it. From coast to coast and across the Atlantic, our global team was ecstatic to move forward with our brand foundation and new identity; a whole new level of engagement had been unleashed. But be forewarned, most organizations do not begin with this level of strategic alignment. However, if you are determined enough as a leader, you will absolutely achieve it.

Since the rebranding, we had made significant progress. For the very first time, our people were really owning and living our values. We saw an immediate impact on the attitudes and engagement of our staff: they yearned to stand for something. We talk about our values in every client pitch, and without a doubt, doing so differentiates us in the marketplace.

Now we look for ways to reinforce our values every day and at specific team-building events. For instance, I host weekly Monday morning "who we are" meetings in the New York office and hold similar meetings when I am in the London or Phoenix offices. I also hold quarterly "connect meetings" in all three offices. We talk about client situations and the current state of the business during the first half of the meeting, then focus on team-building exercises in the second half.

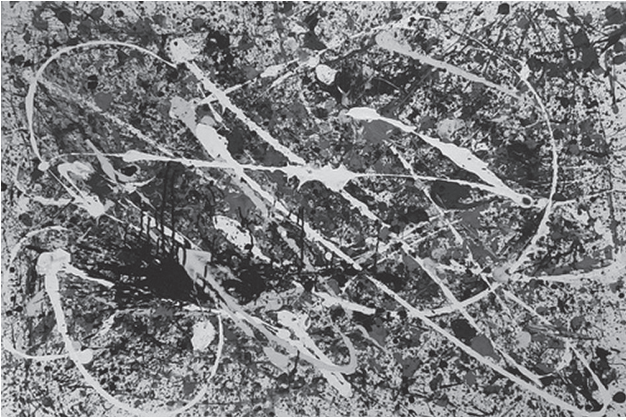


Figure I.2 Investis digital value: Bring Passion.

At one of the London meetings, each team was assigned one of our values and created a piece of modern art to reflect a that value (see Figures I.2, I.3, and I.4). We invited professional artists to our meeting to guide the exercise. We covered the floor with plastic and gave everyone a smock. Paint was flung everywhere, and we had a great time full of laughs and quirky interpretations; our personalities really sprang forth. We then hung the paintings on the wall, reminding each team member that they were a part of creating and reinforcing our values.



Figure I.3 Investis digital value: Embrace Clarity.



Figure I.4 Investis digital value: Inspire Greatness.

Without Fran and her team, we never would have so quickly reached the point where we are living our values daily. And what I learned is just how darn important it is to weave values into everyday interactions and use them as a filter for making remarkable business decisions. But to win in the market, you must first identify your values in order to live them. So let's take a look at Fran's approach and how she developed the comprehensive process.

Finding the Three Keys

In 1992, I (Fran) opened and ran a printing company, but I always spent a lot of time researching and learning about the field of marketing. When a client asked for a price quote for brochures, I'd ask, "Why?" Some clients left us because we had an unconventional approach and I asked too many questions. Those were the transactional-type clients. On the other hand, our really great clients valued my line of questions: "Why do you need this direct-mail piece?" "How will this brochure be used?" "Is this the right collateral to solve your problem?" When the client went down this path with me, typically they did not end up buying what they came for—instead they got what they needed versus what they thought they needed. In the end, I gained a client—not a customer—who bought so much more and valued our relationship, which translated into staying with us for years. I thought I was a good salesperson. I learned over time that part of my success was because I focused on serving the client's needs instead of what they thought they needed. I was a strategist without even strategizing; I just enjoyed asking very particular questions. Our approach was always about the total brand experience—not just the transactional commodity such as a business card, brochure, or a direct mail piece.

For the first few years, I focused on repeatedly asking "why" to our customers in order to distill their "want" down to an actual need, but soon discovered that asking *why* was not enough. I began looking for the other parts of how and where *why* fits into the larger framework of building a brand foundation. After several years of intense trial, error, and iteration within my own dedicated team, I developed a full-circle approach to discovering, designing, and building a brand foundation using the Three Keys to unlock both purpose and profit. We have proven this model over and over since 2005, and the results are nothing less than impressive.

When we worked with Don to rebrand Investis Digital, we laid out the new brand foundation in about thirty days. That is not a

typical timeframe. But Don brilliantly led the success of the integration process in the following months. He invested the time to clarify the message with the right words so that he was able to realign his entire team into making an emotional connection to the Three Keys and the brand foundation. Don invested the time with each of his senior leaders to point out the personal alignment and valued contribution they brought to the larger collective company, so they could do the same for the divisions and teams they lead. Everyone began understanding their role in the shared vision. Doing so empowered each leader to lead in a way that makes a personal connection to each of the more than five hundred employees at the company. The reason why everyone loves the brand and is now excited by it is that they can see and feel their personal contribution and value, which fulfills them at a deep, intrinsic level. In Investis Digital, employees are not cogs in a wheel or transactional robots; they are humans who are valued and feel deep purpose in what they do and how they do it, every single day. That is exactly how Don and his board have experienced the direct correlation between a rock-solid brand foundation and rapid productivity, ultimately resulting in increased overall profitability in a condensed timeline.

In *The Business Case for Purpose*, Harvard Business Review Analytics Services reports its findings of a global survey of 474 executives. They write, “Most executives believe purpose matters. 89 percent of executives surveyed said a strong sense of collective purpose drives employee satisfaction; 84 percent said it can affect an organization’s ability to transform, and 80 percent said it helps increase customer loyalty.”¹

When a leader has the courage to fully embrace the Three Keys—purpose, values, and story—there will be significant impacts in all aspects of business: sales, marketing, human resources, strategic partnerships, and so on. The Three Keys become the filter through which any leader communicates your brand with employees, vendors, and partners. When you stay aligned with the message, more people will repeat it until they become megaphones for your brand. Ultimately,

you begin attracting the right people while simultaneously repelling the wrong people. Your business transforms from shooting crap at a wall to the most powerful, intrinsically motivating magnet humanly possible. This is not opinion, this communications approach is based on neuroscience.

We fully explain the Three Keys—purpose, values, and story—in Chapter 1. Then, chapter by chapter, we walk you through the pieces of leading your professional services firm through the lens of the Three Keys. You can start at the beginning of the book and read through to the end or pick and choose the chapters that address your current needs. In each chapter, you'll learn the principles related to the topic at hand, read our stories, and leave with practical and immediately actionable tasks.

A purposeful brand is built from the inside out, and like any enduring structure it requires a solid foundation. Your brand's foundation is codified in a set of written materials that are authentic, intentional, and customized—the starting point for all brand communication. Let's begin to build yours.

Note

1. <https://hbr.org/resources/pdfs/comm/ey/19392HBRReportEY.pdf>