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THE SEED

On the DNA of a brand, and why it cannot be generated.

By David Maruyama

REAL BRANDS — ESSAY 2 OF 6

THE FRAMEWORK

The seed: real + authentic + higher purpose. The stone: the layers that form around it.

THE APPLICATION

The moment my own brand story kept returning to one word: beacon.

Hold a handful of flower seeds in your palm and they look almost the same. Nothing on the surface tells you which one becomes a rose and which becomes a sunflower. Yet the flower is already there. Everything it will become is written inside, in its DNA.

Once the flower blooms, everyone can see it. There is no special insight in recognizing a beautiful flower. The real skill is reading the seed: understanding its elements before anything is visible, and seeing the potential bloom while it is still hidden.

Anyone can admire a flower. Few can read a seed. Once you have read it, the question is how far it can reach.

That is what I mean when I say the seed is the DNA of a brand.

What the DNA is made of

I have come to see it as a function of three elements.

- **Real.** The founder's experience, lived over years and years. Work actually done, problems actually solved, results actually earned. Nobody can prompt it into existence, because it existed before anyone described it.
- **Authentic.** The founder is who they say they are, and the brand reflects it. Look at the brand and you see the founder; look at the founder and you recognize the brand. No gap between the storefront and the substance.
- **Higher purpose.** The founder's own reason to build, one that goes beyond money and power. The reason they will carry it through the hard parts. Without it, real experience is just a résumé.

Each element leaves traces you can check. For the real, look for years of work you can point to: roles held, problems solved, results others can confirm. It doesn't hold when the experience can't be traced. For the authentic, the founder's story matches how they act and how others describe them. It doesn't hold when the brand says one thing and the founder's record shows another. For the higher purpose, look for choices that cost something, whether time, money or an easier path given up. It doesn't hold when the purpose appears only in the marketing.

The seed is not the whole story, though. Around it, layers form: the stories, the analysis, the reflections, the plans, the structure, and the standard the founder works by. Many of the founders I meet built that standard inside demanding organizations, where best in class was a daily requirement. Those layers are what turn a seed into a stone.

Best in class is the internal metric a brand uses to measure how well it delivers to its customers, from the creation of the brand to the moment the product or service reaches them. It is measured inside and confirmed by the customer’s experience. It rests on five measures:

- **Real value.** Why the brand exists for the customer.
- **Competence.** The know-how to execute every task in the process.
- **Commitment.** Holding the standard and improving it continuously.
- **Precision.** Finding the levers that matter, at the molecular level.
- **Quality.** The level at which every action is executed.

Every action measured against these five tells the brand where it stands, and what to improve next.

A stone needs pressure as well as layers. The hard moments test whether the seed has what it takes to keep going. The layers prepare the seed. Pressure tests those layers. The resulting stone protects and carries the seed into the market.

From seed to stone

Nature already has a word for this. In fruits like peaches, cherries and olives, the hard core is literally called the stone. Inside it is the seed. The stone is the layers that formed around the seed to protect it and carry it into the world.

Throughout this series I go beneath the surface of each idea, into the gap between what a brand shows and what it is. That gap is what this whole series is about.

Put side by side, the seed is the brand's DNA: real + authentic + higher purpose. It is who the founder is. The stone is the seed wrapped in layers of stories, analysis, reflection, plans, design and structure, held to a standard of real value, competence, commitment, precision and quality. It is that identity, prepared and pressure-tested, ready to meet the world with the weight to make a wave.

What can't be generated

A positioning exercise, a gap in the market, a story crafted to sound good: all of these can be generated now. The seed cannot. The DNA is unique; execution depends on talent, systems and capabilities, and those can be found in the network. That doesn't make execution easy. It takes discipline and constant contact with the market. But execution can be learned and hired. The seed can't.

During the workshop, I wrote my own brand story. I expected to describe what CiteHQ does. Instead, the story kept returning to a single word I had already used in the company's vision: *beacon*. A brand as a fixed point of light, standing out from the noise. AI helped me see that pattern: the word kept returning across my vision, my purpose and my story. The word was already mine; AI noticed it. That's AI at its best: a mirror sharp enough to show you your own pattern.

The exercise showed me an idea that was already there. That is what reading a seed feels like from the inside.

If someone read your seed today, what word would keep coming back?
