

“Be Yourself. Be Your Own Brand.”

Since having taken the steering wheel at Ford nine months ago, CEO Jacques Nasser has launched a revolution at the 96-year-old auto giant. Ford is now the world's most profitable car company with \$5.9 billion in net income, and some observers believe it could overtake General Motors as the world's No. 1 car company by 2001. Enormous changes in the auto industry have been fueled by the emergence of the Internet. “Cyber business is going to become part of everything we touch,” says Nasser, who spoke last week at Wharton. During times of such wrenching change, companies need insightful leadership. According to Nasser, the key to cultivating leadership lies in recognizing leadership and using them to make a difference. “Be yourself,” says Nasser. “Be your own brand.”

Zhou Enlai, former premier of China, was asked during the mid 1970s about the significance of the Chinese revolution of 1949. His reply: “It's too early to say.”

That observation, says Jacques Nasser, CEO of [Ford Motor Co.](#), who was in China last month celebrating the 50th anniversary of the revolution, could well apply to the worldwide technological revolution that the Internet has unleashed in this decade. It may take years to recognize, but “cyber-business is going to become part of everything we touch,” says Nasser.

Nasser should know. Since having taken the steering wheel at Ford nine months ago, he has launched his own revolution at the 96-year-old auto giant. Ford, according to [BusinessWeek](#) (October 11), is now the world's most profitable car company with \$5.9 billion in net income. Fueled by its purchase of Volvo for \$6.45 billion and an increased stake in Nissan, the company is positioned to overtake [General Motors](#) as the world's No. 1 automaker by 2001, *BusinessWeek* predicts. Although Ford still faces challenges—such as overdependence on its truck line and faltering operations in South America—Nasser is widely seen as having his foot firmly on the gas pedal.

Speaking at the Wharton School on October 7, Nasser discussed issues ranging from the Internet revolution to the challenges of leading Ford's 360,000 employees. “E-commerce is not going to settle down,” Nasser says. “Every second of the day, someone is tunneling into your customer base. Technology makes that possible. Anyone who does not look at business as a total equation will be taken over.”

That perspective, in part, drove Nasser to invest in early September in Microsoft's MSN [CarPoint](#) web service. The goal was not, as some might imagine, to sell cars directly to customers over the Internet and to bypass dealers. The most valuable aspect of its partnership with CarPoint is the access that Ford now has to large amounts of customer data about car design, color, feature preferences and so on. Mining this data will enable Ford to better understand its customers, which Nasser sees as Ford's core mission.

“Businesspeople tend to think of business and profits as being the same,” says Nasser. “But if you are mesmerized by profits, you'll never get them. Business is about nurturing customers. Profits are a measure, over time, of how well you are doing that.”

Nasser believes that the combination of the Internet with manufacturing will give companies opportunities to get closer to customers than ever before. Traditionally, auto companies designed vehicles, manufactured them, sold them through dealers, and didn't

hear from customers for at least another three years until they returned to make their next purchase. The Internet, however, changes all that by giving customers power over crucial design and feature decisions. “We’ll use the combination of Ford and Microsoft to redesign the design and manufacturing process, so that customers won’t just be able to order cars, but also see them through the whole process,” Nasser says. “We’ll get unfiltered information about what our customers want, and that will affect the entire value chain.”

To guide companies through such wrenching changes, companies will need insightful leadership. According to Nasser, the key to cultivating leadership lies in recognizing differences—and using them to make a difference. He explained this with reference to his own life. Nasser was born in Lebanon, and his family moved to Australia when he was three. “I didn’t look Australian, and when I went to school, I was different than the kids in my class. I spoke Arabic, not English. My lunch was tabouli and flat bread, and kids would laugh at me. But I stayed with my food. The lesson I learned was, it’s okay to be different. Be yourself. Be your own brand. Stand up for what you believe in.”

Daring to be different is just one trait of a confident leader. Nasser believes that leaders should teach and learn at the same time. “Get into a zone that makes you uncomfortable,” he says. “Be an expert in your own field, but develop a horizontal network of people off whom you can bounce ideas. Get as much international experience as you can. Be technically literate about the Internet and how it relates to your field.”

Nasser says that leaders who cultivate these traits can potentially succeed in any industry. Wealth-creating opportunities are available in all industries today, unlike what the dot.com mania might seem to suggest. “There’s no bad business, only bad strategies,” Nasser notes, and people who believe in themselves can certainly succeed. “Be passionate about what you do,” he says. “You’ve got to be driven by a goal beyond monetary value. It has to be in your heart, not just an intellectual stimulus. Every single moment for me is a hair-tingling moment.”

[Jacques Nasser’s vision for Ford: A speech to shareholders](#)

[Computerworld on Ford’s information technology strategy](#)

[The Detroit News on how Jacques Nasser and William Ford share leadership](#)