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Article *in* Perspectives · July 2014

DOI: 10.1080/13603108.2014.913538

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Managing your personal brand

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Abstract

Everyone has a personal brand. To ensure success at work you need to manage your personal brand which is made up of your tangible and intangible attributes. This paper reviews the literature around personal branding, looks at some of the attributes and discusses ways you can reflect and begin to build your personal brand in a higher education context. The paper finishes with some five ways to make sure your personal brand fails!

Keywords: personal branding; reputation; career development

Introduction

Ask yourself these questions in your work situation:

- What do people think of me?
- If I had to choose a word to describe myself at work what would it be?
- What skills differentiate me from my peers?

This is the basis of your personal brand. Everyone has a personal brand and it can be either positive, negative or neutral, for example, you will know people whose name, when mentioned, either gets an immediate 'they're great' or a not so wanted 'not really sure what I think of them'. Your personal brand is made up of your biography, experience, skills, behaviours, appearance and your name (James 2009). It is not just what is already known your personal brand can affect new contacts. Think about when you meet someone for the first time. For better or worse, we take less than a second (390 milliseconds to be precise) to form an impression of someone's personality based on their voice (Bar *et al* 2006, Thomson 2014) and other attributes. Of course, some people have famously changed their voice - Margaret Thatcher for one, but this is a very difficult undertaking. So, people make snap judgements of you when they first meet you and apart from changing your voice (difficult) what else can you do to manage, to a certain degree, the decisions other people are making of you; what can you do to manage your 'personal brand' and why should you.

Personal Brand

Personal branding as a term was first used in 1997 in Tom Peters' FastCompany article, in which he said: 'We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You' (Peters 1997). Whether you accept quite that level of evangelicalism on this topic or not, the key aspect of personal branding is that everyone does have one, or what Peters (1999 from Shephard 2005) calls 'a sign of distinction' and we either have to manage our own brand or someone else will manage it for us, giving other people in your organisation power. It has been said that by 'nurturing your brand ... will ensure that you get out in front of the pack' (Arruda 2005 from Shephard 2005).

Your personal brand then will let people know what you offer above what your CV says – after all many people have degrees and skills training, but you need that *je ne sais quoi* that will differentiate you. You need a strategy to effectively manage your personal brand because this is about how people perceive you and how you can influence that perception. The Personal Branding Group say that 'personal branding is also not an option.' Montoya and Vandehey (2003) say that to be effective, your personal brand must evoke three basic perceptions:

- You are different: differentiation, or the ability to be seen as new and original, is important;
- You are better: your brand must encourage the belief that you are among the best at what you do in some way;
- You are authentic: great brands are 'spin-free zones'.

This last point I was suggest is very important and especially in higher education. There is something about people that choose to work in a university that means they can sniff out spin at a hundred paces; your brand must be built on the truth of who you are, what your strengths are, and what you love about your work.

According to McNally and Speak (2002 p. 75) 'every brand, including your personal brand, contains an implicit promise ... [it] should reflect the desire and ability to meet another specific person's needs and desires at a particular time.' They elaborate (pp. 89–90): 'the first time a personal relationship provides value for someone else, brand equity starts to accrue ... You may never have thought of that as evidence of a strong personal brand before, but by now you should be beginning to see patterns ... You know what you can turn to them for, and you have a pretty good idea of how they'll respond. That's a branded relationship'.

Jennifer Holloway (2013) says that personal brand consists of values, drivers, reputation, behaviour, skills and image; basically everything we do affects our personal brand, including:

- The way we talk, walk and dress,
- Our education and class,
- The way we negotiate and meet our obligations,
- Our customer service and presentation skills,
- How we follow through on our promises (adapted from Montoya and Vandehey 2003).

These various attributes can be split into two components – tangible and intangible. The tangible parts are easier to manage, such as:

- Our image: what does our image convey about us?
- Our skills: what can we offer beyond our formal qualifications?
- Our behaviour: what aspects of this promotes us?

However, the other components are intangible and need more work. What is our current reputation – what do people say or think about us when we're not in the room? Are we consistent? Do we always meet our promises? What are our drivers, what matters to us and motivates us? What are our values?

The idea of managing our personal brand is the process of taking all of the above and packaging these attributes into an identity that gives us that added extra above our competitors (for projects, jobs etc.). Our personal brand then is the clear concept that comes to mind whenever people think of us. Therefore, it should be positive and represent what we stand for as mentioned above:

- Who we are,
- What we do,
- What makes us different.

Reflection and Feedback

A starting point for managing your personal brand is to reflect on what messages your current brand is sending. When we reflect we consider something, such as an activity, deeply which we might not have otherwise given any thought to. We consciously look at and think about our experiences, our actions, our feelings and responses - we term this reflective practice. Although there are multiple and contradictory understandings of reflective practice there is some consensus on a definition. In general reflective practice is the learning through and from your own experience moving towards gaining new insights of practice (Finlay 2008). As this often involves examining

assumptions about everyday practice it should be a valuable tool to use to reflect on our personal brand. This is often referred to as 'reflection-on-action' which is when you reconsider what you did do, how you judged how successful the outcomes were, and what changes could be made next time to result in different outcomes. This develops a much greater self-awareness and allows you to narrow the theory-practice gap (how you think you acted vs how you did act). Indeed this type of reflection on practice is often an official benchmark for professional registration and practice.

Feedback from others is a good way to try and see yourself through another person's eyes. It can be difficult to hear messages that aren't congruent with your own views but this can be very powerful. Many universities Learning and Development Departments will have access to activities such as 360 degree feedback mechanisms. You answer a set of questions about you and your behaviour, likes and dislikes at work for example, and then you identify a number of colleagues to do the same. The key here is to use both the obvious colleagues such as your line manager but also the not so obvious ones – whose opinion do you really value? Who isn't automatically going to give you 'excellent' in each area? Who will really spend time thinking and being honest? To get the best out of these activities you must choose people who will be honest, hard as that may be. You can also just ask people to provide feedback for you especially around specific activities or projects you undertook. Feedback just after the close of a project is really valuable as this is all fresh in someone's mind and being asked to provide feedback on something specific is usually much easier than a person's attributes in general. If you undertake any Continuing Professional Development events you may also get feedback as part of that, or will be asked to do something similar to above; for example, the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education's courses often contain feedback as a component, becoming chartered in your area of expertise often includes this as well.

Developing your personal brand

James (2009) suggests starting by writing a statement of purpose, determining your point of view and ascertaining your principles – they act as guides to you but importantly they are hard for others to replicate. Your statement of purpose guides you on how you conduct yourself and acts as a filter for decisions that you'll need to make to deliver your brand. For example, an HR Manager's statement might say 'I'm in the business of providing senior management with the appropriate human capital to ensure a successful university'. The second step is to create differentiation which is when you determine your beliefs and unique take on the world by completing the sentence 'I believe the world would be a better place if...'. So, for our HR Manager this might look something like 'I believe the world would be a better place if organisations nurtured and developed their staff to allow them to attain their ambitions'. Now you need to think about your principles, your statement here should begin with 'I always', 'I only' or 'I never'... So, our HR Manager might say 'I

will only work for organisations that truly value their staff' (adapted from James 2009).

According to McNally and Speak (2002 p. 62) 'defining your personal brand dimensions and refining them into a personal brand platform involves identifying the competencies, standards and style that go into each relationship people have with you'. They then propose the following three steps (2002: 63–7):

Step One: Identify the Areas Where Your Competencies Matter;

Step Two: Examine Your Standards and Values;

Step Three: Define Your Style.

Personal brands (like commercial brands) take time to develop. We can put all of the attributes into place but it develops at its own pace; it is a long term strategy. Brands grow organically, the best personal brands develop as a result of strong communication, a sense of purpose, and the person behind the brand backing up the brand's promise again and again. Brands demand consistency and clarity, a strong brand can withstand some shocks to the system but too much inconsistency or 'failure' leads to a rapid diminution of brand status. Now that we have our brand strategy how do we go about developing it, what are the different tactics we can use?

Work hard

You need to get noticed and you need to know what skills to develop to get where you want to be. Nothing says more about your reputation than achieving results, having the right attitude and helping others at the same time.

Do work none else wants to

There are lots of opportunities to take on a bit extra here and there from project managing to taking on committee servicing, to being involved with recruitment. The amount of times I've heard colleagues say 'no ,I'm too busy to take on X' but soon people stop asking. Taking on work gets you noticed.

Learn one new skill

Choose one new skill that will benefit your ambitions and make a commitment to become an expert in it.

Sharpen your narrative

When people ask you 'what have you been up to lately?' (this happens a lot before meetings or the like begin), Clark (2014) says we should not waste the opportunity to promote ourselves. How

many of us have said 'oh, not much'. However, when developing and managing your personal brand take the opportunity to tell people something, you've been to a school governor meeting, you've written your latest blog post etc., or how your latest project is progressing.

Rekindle old ties

Professor Adam Grant (2013) has written about 'dormant ties', those people you used to know but haven't been in touch with for a good while. They're still in your contact list and in the time you haven't seen them they will have made new connections and networks and if you rekindle the link they will share these with you; you can then return the favour.

Seize on an emerging trend

When you start to want to build a name for yourself, it's hard if you're a generalist. You want to become the go to person, pick a topic you're truly interested in (be authentic) and develop that, all the better if the trend is emerging. This could be something from your masters, MBA, PhD work for example, or something that you've been working on – think MOOCs.

Use social media

There are three main social media platforms used by HE professionals – LinkedIn, Twitter and blogs (Gander *et al* 2014). They offer the ability to manage many more peripheral connections than can be managed face-to-face and certainly help if you work across countries, they also help you to share and promote your work to a wide audience.

Start creating content

If you start to think regularly about a subject, a way of building your brand is start blogging (free sites like [Wordpress.com](https://www.wordpress.com) are easy to use) as you automatically showcase your expertise in an area. You could just start with Twitter or LinkedIn but getting started is the key and then deciding this is going to be a regular activity, is important so put time for it in your diary (adapted from Clark 2014).

Why isn't my branding working?

Ah, the 100 million dollar question! Five things to do ensure your brand fails:

1. Don't reflect on your current brand:

It is hard to be self-critical, or accept criticism from others, but if you want to improve your brand,

reflection and feedback is the only starting point. So, take a deep breath and ask your colleagues (and not just the ones you know will be nice) to critically reflect on your strengths and weaknesses. Now you've got a starting point.

2. Don't define what you want to be known for:

You're trying to build a specific brand and clarity is key – do not try to be all things to all people. What are you building your brand for, your next job? Then what do those people embody and how can you build towards that? You might be great at your current job but you could be promoting exactly that. You need to be promoting that you'll be good at your bosses job. Focus on the long-term, what skills and attitudes do you need for the next step up the career ladder.

3. Over- or under-share:

Are you over-promoting yourself? People tend to hate that, it can't all be about what you've just done, who you've had lunch with etc. Are you under-promoting yourself? Do you tweet at all? Do you keep LinkedIn up-to-date? Are you careless with what you share? Really, should that selfie with you and six beers have gone out on your professional profiles?

4. Don't ever get out from behind your PC:

If you're an introvert social media is a boon. We can sit and share and blog and write to our hearts content and none of that necessarily means interacting with people face to face. Sometimes however the best thing though is to get out from behind your screen and go and talk to some people. Have you been to the annual AUA or Guardian HE conference? Did you look at the delegate list and who you might want to meet? At these big events planning is key. Look at the delegate list, who would you like to meet? Find a strategy to ensure that happens.

5. Don't update your profiles:

So you decided to start to manage your brand a while ago and set up your LinkedIn and Twitter profiles for example. Have you updated them? Have you promoted yourself and your achievements on these platforms (but see point 4 above). People really do Google you when you apply for jobs etc. so make sure your profiles are up-to-date and give the right professional image. Have you joined relevant groups e.g. AUA, loveHE, THE, the list could go on, and contributed to the discussions? Have you followed individuals on Twitter and re-tweeted their stories, and tweeted your own and debated ideas (in 140 characters of course! Adapted from Webber 2013).

You might not agree with the premise of taking concepts from marketing *products* and applying them to marketing your *self* but arguably there is benefit in doing all of the activities above to improve your reputation and visibility in your organisation.

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