

# THE PROMISE OF Personal Branding



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Personal branding is perhaps one of the most misunderstood ideas manifested by the Web 2.0 revolution. Tinder writes that it is a means by which a person establishes a consciously crafted and public professional presence and status in his or her field and the world at large, and personal brands articulate our distinctiveness in relationship to our colleagues and thus characterize the unique contributions that we can make to those who engage our services.

**N**o question about it—personal branding is hot and is here to stay. Nonetheless, it understandably puzzles the uninitiated. To begin with, there is the name. Why is a phenomenon that is manifestly for professional purposes tagged as “personal?” For this, there actually is a good explanation. The “personal” in personal branding effectively distinguishes it from its corporate counterpart. In addition, personal branding

does incorporate important parts of one’s persona.

A second cause for confusion (not to mention skepticism) is that at a quick glance personal branding can be misconstrued as a gussied-up concoction of old-fashioned image making, which is, in turn, associated with falseness and hypocrisy. True—brands can be confused with images that may bear little relationship to the reality they purport to portray. We recently have seen examples of

fragile and now broken images in the worlds of politics and sports.

As we will see, however, personal branding is not image-making because it grows organically out of who and what a person is. The essence of a personal brand is authenticity.

A third potential distraction is the occasional treatment of personal branding as a job search tool. It certainly can function in this way, but its first and primary purpose is that of



professional self-definition. A solid and properly built brand naturally will attract attention, admiration, and professional opportunities. On the other hand, waiting until unemployed to begin building a brand does not work.

### What Is It?

Personal branding is a means by which a person establishes a consciously crafted and public professional presence and status in his or her field and the world at large. Until recently, only wealthy and powerful people such as Jack Welch and Oprah Winfrey were able to cre-

ate “brands.” Technology has forever changed this and made branding a tool available to anybody with access to a computer and Internet connection.

Our personal brand articulates our distinctiveness in relationship to our colleagues and thus characterizes the unique contributions that we can make to those who engage our services. A personal brand clarifies and demonstrates “what makes you different and special and includes your strengths, values, and passions,” according to William Arruda, a personal branding expert, on <http://williamarruda.sys-con.com/>.

A personal brand not only embodies our identity and capabilities but effectively communicates this representation consistently across a multi-verse of intertwining platforms such as LinkedIn, blogs, Twitter, and Facebook. Our brand pulls together and integrates our personal qualities and professional abilities into a single entity that functions as a promise of value to others. Thus, while our brand is a competitive tool in the marketplace, it is far more than an image.

Meg Guiseppi is among a handful of people who is at the forefront of the branding movement and has



## The Historical Context of Personal Branding

One way to spot an important trend and distinguish it from passing fads is to determine whether it grows out of an historical development and is tied to the dynamics of future change. Personal branding has no trouble establishing its bona fides as a product of historical evolution.

To understand the position and power of personal branding it is useful to see its rootedness in three broad changes spanning the last 40 years of U.S. history. The first was economic, the second societal, and the third technological.

◆ The heart of the baby boomer cohort was in college when the United States experienced its first massive layoffs in the early 1970s. Today, layoffs are an assumed part of life but 40 years ago it was shocking when economic pillars such as AT&T and IBM let go thousands of people in one or two fell swoops. These and following “reductions in force” permanently shattered the implicit assumptions of employer-employee loyalty. No longer could we look toward employers as guarantors of life-long employment and personal economic stability. Under this evolving new order, employees began taking command of their own vocational destinies.

◆ As individual workers took responsibility for their careers, experts in career and job search led the way toward a new

understanding of work as a source of human satisfaction and meaning. At the time, not many of us realized how startling a break this was from traditional conceptions. For centuries, work was conceived of principally as a social duty, a burden of responsibility, and a taking of one’s proper role in the divinely determined order of things. Seldom had work been considered an intrinsic source of personal significance and satisfaction.

But the breakdown of traditional economic relationships helped trigger a revolutionary reexamination of the purpose of work that elevated individual choice and initiative and empowered people to define their own career direction. One of today’s byproducts of this emancipation is that we now spend an average of only three to four years in the same job and five to six years working for the same company.

◆ As these two trends entrenched themselves in the developed world, we were convulsed by a communication revolution that is still hurtling forward at a torrid pace and transforming the ways in which human beings communicate with and relate to each other. Technology has multiplied the means and the reach of individual self-expression on every imaginable level and in doing so has given us the tools for personal branding with the touch of a computer “on” button.

done more than anybody to apply personal branding to the development of career identity and attainment of vocational success. She writes on her website, <http://executivecareer-brand.com> that, “personal branding links your passions, key personal attributes, and strengths with your value proposition, in a crystal clear message that differentiates your unique promise of value and resonates with your target audience.”

The “value proposition” and “unique promise of value” that Guiseppi speaks of consists of what we can accomplish for whatever cause, client, or company that hires us or engages our services. Thus, personal branding joins together what is most deeply real and compelling about ourselves with our definitive accomplishments to date in an effective strategy for professional fulfillment and success. And it puts us firmly in the driver’s seat. We cannot go to an ad agency or image maker for a brand.

## How to Get a Personal Brand

“Getting” a personal brand cannot be done quickly. To have a brand requires an interactive process of reflection and, in time, the process flowers into a broad self-representation in social media. Each person’s path to a fully embodied brand is unique but most share common elements, particularly when starting out. Traditional career exploration might include:

- 1. Self-exploration and reflection.
  - What are my values?
  - How and where do I find meaning in life?
  - What am I passionate about?
  - What distinguishes me from others in and out of my field?

- In what environments do I function most effectively?

2. Conversations with others—how are we seen by those who know us. The ongoing development of even a mature brand involves constant dialogue with a larger community.

3. Consulting online social media branding experts such as Meg Guiseppi, William Arruda, and Dan Schawbel for an understanding of how brands function.

4. Experimentation to fine-tune one’s passion and establish its niche.

5. The production of foundational written documents like a résumé.

6. Brand articulation across a spectrum of social media.

In the stages of initial brand development it may be helpful to zero in on four career documents:

1. **A value proposition**—a brief, compact statement about who you are and the value you can deliver.

2. **Your elevator pitch**—this is a longer elucidation of the value proposition and though it is good to write it down for precision and fine-tuning; you usually will communicate it orally.

3. **Your résumé.** A branded résumé has a clear focus that articulates, highlights, and illustrates a personal brand.

4. **The cover letter**—every cover letter should be uniquely branded for each application.

For most people, these documents have constituted their entire job search arsenal. For those in the stage of brand building, they are an important foundation for the critical work that lies ahead. For information on branded résumés see the resource list on page 55.



## Social Media Branding

LinkedIn, important though it is, presents only one of many social media venues to use for personal branding. It would be overwhelming to list them all here and a full-time job to keep up with them. But here is a list that many experts recommend considering at the outset.

- ◆ Twitter;
- ◆ Facebook;
- ◆ commenting to blogs and message boards;
- ◆ guest blogging;
- ◆ operating and writing a blog;
- ◆ participating in discussion groups;
- ◆ creating a visual CV with links to some of the above;
- ◆ creating and maintaining a website with links;
- ◆ posting work and work projects online;
- ◆ joining and contributing to professional groups through LinkedIn; and
- ◆ taking advantage through these communication platforms to help others by sharing your expertise.

## The Personal Brand in Virtual Reality

If you are new to personal branding and have surveyed all the ways to communicate with others online, you know about two of the challenges you face—where to begin and where to stop.

The first dilemma is the easier to answer. Begin with LinkedIn. Join



and within a week post a complete profile. Complete means a picture because without it many people will not take you seriously. Also, get three recommendations. They do not need to paint you as a saintly master of the universe or be of Tolstoyan length. Most are a paragraph and focus on the recommendee's strong points as experienced by the recommendation writer.

Whether it is worth your while to participate in all of the social media listed in the sidebar and others not listed will depend on your particular circumstances, such as whether you are functioning as a free agent entrepreneur or are employed by a company. Some people choose to plunge into social media while others are comfortable taking it slower. For example, one can get a profile up on LinkedIn, join and contribute to a

few of its groups, and participate on blogs and discussion groups without swinging into a full-blown personal branding campaign. Some people raise their level of social media participation slowly and suddenly find that they have established a nascent brand to which others are responding.

Before you take the plunge or dip your toe in the water, let us review several social media/personal branding basics.

**Consistency.** It is a truism that a brand requires consistency of presentation. To use an example from the corporate sphere, we are unlikely to see Walt Disney Company sponsoring World Wrestling Federation bouts or walk into a Borders or Barnes & Noble bookstore to encounter racks of used lawn mowers. Translating this into the realm of personal branding in the most obvi-

ous way, you cannot expect your brand to thrive if you are presenting one person on LinkedIn and another on Facebook. In fact, recently some professionals have begun to hide their playful, naughty Facebook profiles from the public.

**Digital dirt.** This brings us to the topic of digital dirt. Picture Google and other search engines as gigantic vacuum cleaners that suck up, categorize, and display every piece of information they find. Much of this may go unnoticed—that is until a potential employer or client searches your name to see what comes up. What may come up are photos that somebody you never met took and posted (so easily done in the digital age) of you the time you drunkenly climbed out your second story college dorm and landed in the flower garden below. Or, a search engine

may unearth rash and intemperate comments you made in a 10-year-old letter to the editor of your industry's professional publication. This is the kind of informational flotsam that hiring managers can turn up with a few clicks.

Unfortunately, there is not much we can do about such shards from our past except know that they are there and be prepared to speak to them if asked. Meanwhile we can populate the search engines with comments on blogs and discussion groups so that questionable information is less noticeable.

**Generosity.** We spoke earlier of the distinction between image-

making and personal branding. The spirit of personal branding is characterized by giving and the sharing with others of one's own experience and expertise.

The more a person gives, the more solid his or her brand becomes. In this way generosity does more for self-branding than the blinkered pursuit of self-interest.

**Authenticity.** The bedrock of personal branding is the authenticity of our brand and our contributions to the virtual conversation. Social media does not—especially over the long haul—make a welcome home for crass and duplicitous self-promotion that presents an image we are selling

rather than a brand that reflects our true character and abilities.

## Conclusion—Citizens of the Virtual World

Personal branding got its start in the United States but it already has spread through much of Europe and is quickly making inroads in other parts of the world. It soon will be a global phenomenon.

This geographic spread will be accompanied by its broadening vocational applicability. Originally, social media was the province of marketing specialists but then grew to include executives in numerous lines of business. It is now encompassing professions like engineering and attracting entrepreneurs of all stripes. It is being adopted, for example, by service professionals such as computer repair technicians, booksellers, caterers, tanning and hair salons, and architects.

Some refer to it as a new means of job hunting but, in many instances, it can preempt the job search by attracting to one's online presence the attention of potential employers who are scouring the Internet in search of the right people for open positions.

Finally, social media is profoundly democratic. It opens up the world of careers, professions, and job search to anybody who is interested and, pulling us into a maelstrom of information and conversation in which we are both learners and teachers. We are not judged by the number of degrees after our name, the number of books we have published, but by the quality of our contributions and actions. ■

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### Key People in Personal Branding

**Meg Guiseppi** – <http://www.executiveresumebranding.com>

**William Arruda** – <http://www.williamarruda.com>,  
<http://www.thepersonalbrandingblog.com>

**Dan Schawbel** – <http://www.danschawbel.com>

**Hubert Rampersad** – <http://www.rampersad.wordpress.com>

### Websites on Social Media and Personal Branding

<http://mashable.com>

<http://www.job-hunt.org/personal-branding/personal-branding.shtml>

<http://www.careerrocketeer.com>

<http://online-social-networking.com/are-you-building-your-personal-brand-and-future-around-your-passion>

### LinkedIn

<http://jobsearchtech.about.com/od/jobsearchtools/a/LinkedIn.htm>

<http://jobmob.co.il/blog/gigantic-linkedin-job-search-tips/>

<http://imonlinkedinnowwhat.com/>

### Twitter

<http://www.personalbrandingblog.com/30-minute-brand-building-for-twitter>

<http://www.twitip.com/personal-brand-how-to-build-yours-in-twitter>

<http://www.careerrocketeer.com/2009/07/20-personal-branding-tips-for-twitter.html>

### Facebook

<http://mashable.com/2009/04/02/facebook-personal-brand>

<http://mashable.com/2009/09/29/facebook-personal-brand-strategy>

<http://www.facebook.com/personalbranding>