

## Creating your personal brand

By VIKKI PACHERA

Brands are, in many ways, a promise

When you buy from Neiman Marcus, you expect a certain level of quality, selection, exclusivity, and service. Your expectations from Costco, however, are different. Here, value is what's most important.

It's not surprising that manufacturers of products that are increasingly commoditized are expanding their brands to incorporate 'experiences' --- from the buying experience to an overall lifestyle. For example, Nike products may not be that different from those of their competitors, but they project an aura of motivation and spirit that comes from the development and investment in the brand.

The notion of branding yourself is not new. From the infamous contrast between Nixon and Kennedy in the 1960 televised debate, politicians have been thinking about and developing their personal brands. Sports heroes over the years enjoyed both the fruits and the wrath of their brands.

More recently, however, the concept of a personal brand became popularized by management guru, Tom Peters. According to Peters, "Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding. We are the CEOs of our own companies: Me, Inc."

Brands differentiate you from others by virtue of unique positioning. The goal is to stand out, be noticed and control--to some degree--how others see you. Creating a strong brand that achieves these goals takes brand development, marketing and flawless execution

### Brand Development

Development of your brand is often a very difficult proposition. We've been taught that self promotion is wrong despite the fact that strong employees make their companies look good, as long as the agendas are aligned. What's more, it's often tough to view yourself objectively.

It's important to remember that because brands are a promise they need to be based in reality. Costco delivers exceptional value because they have a unique supply chain and retail space. In developing your brand, you need to think long and hard about:

WHO ARE YOU? Serial entrepreneur? Turn-around artist? Well rounded technologist? In answering this question, try to extract themes that run through your professional experience. Look for two or three identifying descriptors that



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Speak to the essence of 'you' with an eye toward how you want to be perceived. Don't be afraid to narrow down who you are to a short list.

**WHAT IS YOUR UNIQUE VALUE?** What can you do for your company and for your clients that is unique? Others may be able to answer that easier than you can.

Tap on people you've worked for. Seek out 360 degree performance review feedback for those answers.

**WHAT DO YOU STAND FOR?** Most business professionals value the same characteristics such as integrity, results, speed, accuracy, customer orientation, etc. However, your experiences, what you excel at, and what you most want to be known for is a subset of that list. By no means does that say that if you pick two or three attributes you don't value the others. Neiman Marcus might be most interested in branding themselves as exclusive and high-end, but that doesn't stop the retailer from offering steep end of season discounts. They simply choose to brand certain key elements of their business over others.

Remember, your brand is something that you work on for years not weeks.

## Marketing

Marketing yourself takes a lot of energy and personal risk. CEOs running small to medium size companies are often too busy 'keeping the wheels on the bus' to focus on themselves as one of the company assets. Professionals looking for career opportunities most commonly think about marketing themselves through a resume. But there are many important pieces in marketing yourself that apply to both job seekers and CEOs.

First and foremost is execution which we'll address in a minute. Without substance, you can't create a realistic promise.

Second is your network. Word of mouth advertising is the best way to get your personal brand noticed. Your network is an asset that needs to be maintained on a regular basis. Keeping in touch with people and developing new contacts is essential. A personal recommendation is simply invaluable.

Third is your online presence. It should go without saying that people will Google you and not simply rely on your title when they do business with you. At the executive level, there should be plenty of examples of your work on the web — quotes, interviews, talks, announcements, etc. Of course, this information should be consistent with the brand identity that you've created. And, ideally, there should be enough 'thought leadership' that people can get the essence of who you are. This takes both energy and overcoming the fear associated with putting yourself 'out there'. Think twice before you blow off an opportunity to speak at your next industry conference, you may be missing a great opportunity to market your brand.

A strong bio is another excellent tool in marketing yourself.

Because a bio is generally unencumbered by details of work history and chronology, it's an outstanding vehicle to market your brand.

As for resumes, clearly they are an important tool --- and most often a weak link in personal branding. For whatever reason, many people, including senior executives, don't spend the time and energy necessary to develop a great resume. "It's good enough" is simply not true. Resumes should be very clear on what you've accomplished—consistent with your personal brand—not simply what you were responsible for. Facts, numbers and results are what make a resume 'pop'. Presentation is of utmost importance.

If you are actively in the job market, you compete against hundreds of others. The fact is that nearly all resumes are pretty boring. While I don't advocate too much creativity, the ones that stand out are well written and beautifully

presented. Also, think about everything that's on your resume and what it says about you. For example, does your email reflect a personal yet professional address?

If you don't have the skill or time to develop a great resume, pay someone else to do it. Investing in yourself is one of the best investments you can make.

## Execution

Developing a crisp personal brand image and blowing the execution is similar to a great PowerPoint deck that never sees the light of day.

Execution starts with presentation. Much has been written about the superficiality of personal branding. To some, the creation of a brand and the element of presentation feels 'fluffy'.

And yet, presentation is a vital part of marketing. Whether it's the highly recognized robin's egg blue of Tiffany's packaging or the elegant look of a dish served at one of the great restaurants of the world, presentation speaks to the promise and increases the perceived value of these products. The same goes for you.

How you dress is only one piece of your presentation. And because you have a lot of choice in choosing your clothing, it's an interesting lever to use in creating your brand. There are times when a tailored suit is appropriate and there are times when jeans are. This is always dependent on with whom you are meeting and what their environment is. Think, ask and do research to get this right.

Presentation is also about your communication.

The voicemail messages you leave, your promptness in returning calls, your emails, and your presentations all matter a lot when it comes to your image. Every interaction counts towards either detracting from or enhancing your brand.

Brand management is about differentiating yourself from others, standing out in a crowd. In business, it's often very important to project a level of seriousness, of professionalism. That promise of being credible, reliable, and excellent in the delivery of work is essential.

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## Vikki Pachera

[vpachera@allenaustinsearch.com](mailto:vpachera@allenaustinsearch.com)

Vikki Pachera is a partner and executive search consultant with Allen Austin. Prior to joining Allen Austin Executive Search, Pachera was vice president of Strategic Alliances & Business Development for Hewlett Packard. She was responsible for creating a strategy and operating plan for the company's top global alliances. Prior Vikki held a variety of management roles at Apple, Compaq Computer, and IBM and co-founded a software service start-up

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