



How to Build a Powerful Personal Brand

If you want to be known as a thought leader or influencer, these steps can help you get there

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Marine industry colleague Rick Ryals recently called and greeted me like this: “How’s my favorite marine marketer doing? Ya still have purple streaks in your hair?”

I chuckled, as I was working on a column about personal branding. Beyond being a marine marketer for more than 40 years, I am a certifiable purple freak. I love my purple streaks, along with my purple Harley-Davidson and two purple autos. My pup has a purple tail. I was purple before Prince. I walk the talk on the topic of personal branding, and I know it’s helped my career.

Forward-thinking professionals should invest in personal branding as a key strategy. This is the intentional process of identifying, packaging and then leveraging your unique strengths, values, experiences, goals and passions to create a memorable, public-facing persona. If you’re seeking to differentiate yourself, then personal branding should be a top priority. If you want to be recognized as the go-to expert among your peers, then effective personal branding can help you achieve your goals.

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos summarized it best: “Your personal brand is what people say about you after you leave the room.”

Think about the top influencers or thought leaders in your business circles. In a few words, how would you describe them? What makes them different? What do you know about their values? How have they broken through the noise? Answers to these questions will uncover basic building blocks of personal branding.

If you want to launch a personal brand, start by finding a quiet place and taking plenty of time to self-reflect. This is one of the most important career exercises you will ever undertake. Brainstorm a list of the skills, experiences, goals, qualities, values and passions that make you unique. This isn’t the time to be modest, though the exercise does require bone-deep honesty. Another idea is to consult with mentors or trusted colleagues. Ask each to share his or her perceptions, candidly, about your unique qualities and distinctions.

Next, self-edit your list to identify your most important differentiators. Some personal branding experts recommend creating a succinct “brand statement,” such as a tagline or 60-second elevator pitch. A word of caution: Always be authentic. The goal is to capture the best of who you are, not who you or others think you should be. As poet and playwright Oscar Wilde wrote: “Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken.”

Once you've articulated your personal brand statement, it's time to shape and share it across platforms. This may include your website or blog, all your social media profiles, professional bios — anywhere you have a brand presence. Being consistent will build credibility.

Do you have key visual components? For example, my personal branding is drenched in purple and includes a logo and tagline to befit a marketer, boater and motorcyclist: Rev Up Your Marketing Horsepower. Everything about your brand — the look, feel and voice — should be a true reflection of you.

To build personal brand equity, establish yourself in the markets that matter. Carefully consider the platforms and content that will allow you to best reach your most prized audience. You could create a Facebook group focusing on a topic where you have expertise. Or, publish a blog to push out on social channels. Share and comment regularly on posts by thought leaders in your field, or within groups where you want to grow your brand. Seek opportunities for networking (live and online).

A few pitfalls to avoid include being a “gung-ho guerilla” whose face and posts are oversaturated. While smart marketers tell you frequency is critical, the trick is to find balance. Overpromoting is a quick way to lose credibility. As you test the waters, monitor what works best in terms of schedules and content.

Also make sure you always deliver a clear message in sync with your persona. Choose images, messages and topics that resonate. Avoid content that comes across as self-aggrandizing versus being created for the good of the audience you hope to influence.

If you're fortunate enough to gain a following, cherish any feedback you generate. Always be positive and responsive, whether the comments are good or bad. Be prepared for criticism and public feedback; it comes with the territory. I consider every response a chance to improve and expand my brand.

As with all things marketing, it's important to regularly assess the effectiveness of your personal branding efforts and to adjust accordingly. Regularly analyze your social engagement including likes, comments, shares and the quality of interactions. Are you noting positive growth in your mentions, tags, follower counts or website traffic? As your personal brand gains momentum, these key performance indicators should follow. If you're failing to gain traction, then experiment with your messaging, and mix up the platforms and formats, to see what sticks.

Another measurement tactic involves conducting regular online searches of your name or any of the personal brand keywords or hashtags you regularly use. Search results yield critical insight into your all-important online reputation.

Part of your personal brand-building involves pushing yourself out of your comfort zone. Embrace new challenges. Offer to speak at conferences, or to participate in webinars or panels. If you're uncomfortable with public speaking, then invest in training. As you develop a rockstar personal brand, exciting opportunities may open doors you never dreamed possible.

As the business guru Tom Peters put it: "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."

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