

Conscious Careering



Use personal branding techniques to set yourself apart from the crowd

Matthew B. Youngquist

There's been a lot of buzz in recent years about the topic of "personal branding" and the idea that career success today depends on one's ability to create a compelling and distinct niche for themselves out in the marketplace. There are books devoted to the subject, blogs obsessed with it, and an entire "Personal Branding Magazine" that discusses the nuances of the topic ad infinitum. Is this all just hype, however, or do serious professionals really need to start thinking of themselves as a "brand" and promoting themselves accordingly?

Based on my observations of how the job market is functioning these days, and the types of individuals it tends to reward, my honest opinion is that yes, personal branding is an effective and important strategy, especially for candidates at the mid-to-senior management levels. Like it or not, the labor market has become increasingly commoditized. There are more college-educated candidates competing for jobs than ever before. Companies can now attract hundreds of qualified applicants with the click of a mouse. And most résumés now look awfully similar, based on the abundance of templates available and the fact that every candidate under the sun is apparently nothing short of a dynamic, results-oriented team player with excellent communication skills.

As a result of this commoditization trend, it has become tougher for the average individual to stand out from the crowd without a few tried-and-true self-promotional techniques in their quiver. This is where personal branding comes in. The most successful professionals today now borrow a page from commodity products in the consumer sector (think soap, razor blades, paper towels, bottled water, etc.) and have started to market themselves in similar fashion. In other words, they isolate exactly what sets them apart from their competitors, then communicate this message—*consciously and consistently*—until they become linked with the desired attribute or quality in the buyer's mind. After all, do you think it's any accident that Volvo cars are associated with "safety" or that Coors beer conjures up images of chilly, snow-capped Rocky Mountains? This is branding in action—and career-minded professionals should follow suit!

Along these lines, here are a few tips that might help in crystallizing and communicating your own unique brand identity:

● **Isolate your authentic strengths.** Whether you're an organization or an individual, the starting point for building a strong brand is to think hard about the qualities and capabilities that distinguish you most from the other products (or people) in your genre. If needed, enlist friends and co-workers in this effort to supply objectivity and point out areas where you really shine. Once you've figured out the strengths that set you apart, write them down and wordsmith them until you can find a creative, powerful, and memorable way to express them to people. Perhaps you're the "fearless" marketer, the "no excuses" project manager, or the Sales VP with the "gold-plated rolodex" who can open up doors all over town?

● **Consistency is key; don't waver.** Once you've decided upon your core branding themes it's imperative to stick to these points each and every time you talk about yourself in a career context. Don't water them down. Make sure to bring up your key strengths early, and often, in any interviewing and networking opportunities that arise, as well as to work them into your résumé, cover letters, on-line profiles, and possibly even your e-mail signature. Again, it will take consistent repeat impressions before people start perceiving you the way you want to be perceived. In the end, however, you'll come across as a focused, value-added professional; not just another "me too" management clone.

● **Avoid competing on price.** Despite the similarities mentioned earlier between career branding and consumer branding, there is one key difference: job hunters don't usually do well by making themselves the cheaper "generic brand" option. So while this approach might work for toilet paper or pharmaceuticals, I'd advise you against pursuing a branding strategy along the lines of "You can hire me for three easy payments of \$20,000" or "I can do everything for you that a Stanford MBA can, but at half the price!" Believe it or not, I've seen this strategy tried, and it's not a pretty sight.

The ultimate lesson? Job hunters are not exempt from the essential laws of marketing, advertising, and branding that rule the consumer marketplace—and in fact, can flourish by using them properly. So apply these proven principles to your own benefit. Develop your own "personal brand" and use it to start building a great reputation for yourself, on purpose!

MATTHEW B. YOUNGQUIST is a Bellevue-based career coach and outplacement consultant who has personally helped over 5,500 professionals address and overcome the unique challenges of employment transition. He currently owns his own consulting practice, Career Horizons, LLC, where he can be reached at (425) 450-4960 or via e-mail at matt@career-horizons.com.