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If you are hoping to add personal branding to your professional repertoire, the truth is, you already have. You already have a personal brand. Everyone you encounter, in any way, forms an impression of you, whether you are a self-employed real-estate professional or an agent at a firm. It doesn’t matter if the interaction is in person, over email, on social media, or a combination, everyone has a specific impression of who you are based on their interactions with you. That impression is your current personal brand. A current brand is a starting point—an opportunity to develop an intentional, specific personal brand.

The concept of a personal brand is attributed to consultant and writer Tom Peters, who, in 1997, introduced the basic idea that an individual should want to be perceived as more than a set of skills in the service of an employer. Peters insisted that “You don’t ‘belong to’ any company for life, and your chief affiliation isn’t to any particular ‘fashion.’ You’re not defined by your job title and you’re not confined by your job description. Starting today, you are a brand.” Since then, the idea of a personal brand has been adapted, enriched, and reinterpreted but remains immensely valuable to today’s professional. Personal branding offers the chance to create emotional connections with others. Ideally, personal brands evoke favorable emotional responses from coworkers, superiors, professional connections, and, of course, clients. Furthermore, the self-knowledge that begins the personal branding process can offer a useful guide to career development, career rethinking, and career success.

We define a personal brand as the totality of impressions communicated by an individual, and, in this investigation, set out to learn (1) why and how personal branding takes place, (2) how personal brands fit with organizational brands, and (3) how, in practice, professionals measure the effectiveness of a personal brand for themselves and/or their organization. In doing so, our research will (1) help you understand how a personal brand can advance your own career and those with whom you work and (2) outline how to manage those personal brands to bring about career advancement. Overall, we aim to help you move beyond the starting point of your current brand by offering a process for evaluating, modifying, and strategically managing a personal brand in such a way that it complements the brand of an organization for which you work or aspire to work.
Our results indicate roughly equal emphasis on competence and personal qualities in creating personal brands, as well as significant interest in distinctiveness. Based on these findings, our basic recommendation is to follow a strategic self-branding process based on one’s values and competencies, similar to the branding methods of companies and products. Match your values and competencies with the priorities of audiences that matter to your career but understand and expect that you will modify your brand over time given different audiences and circumstances as you career advances.

Our Study

To hear illustrative comments on personal branding, our investigation consisted of interviewing sales reps, sales managers and executives, and professionals selling their services in a diverse set of companies in Europe and the U.S. We asked 33 individuals, roughly half from each of those two geographic areas, whether they have a personal brand, and, if so, how they created it and how it fits with the organization that employs them. Also, we asked for results they attribute to personal branding, and how they measure the effect of branding. The 33 respondents we interviewed included seven consultants and one attorney, plus 25 individuals in sales, sales management, or marketing management. All but three respondents said they had personal brands.

Our Findings

Asked to describe their personal brands, respondents gave answers that fell primarily into two categories of focus, showing that personal brands were most often created either to convey competence, to build relationships, or in some cases, both. Fifteen of the 33 respondents articulated a focus on strength, cleverness, and competence in order to evoke respect and trust. Eleven other respondents described their brands as focusing on concepts of warmth, kindness, and good character in order to promote relationship-building. This allows us then to categorize personal brands by whether they focus on competence, relationship building or both. In addition to projecting traits to be respected, liked, or both, four respondents mentioned an aim to be distinctive and memorable.

Social media channels initially appeared likely to be key to personal branding approaches, but about half of U.S. respondents said that face-to-face communication mattered far more. In contrast, nearly all European respondents valued social media greatly, in particular LinkedIn. They emphasized the importance of keeping online information up to date and avoiding mentioning partying, politics, anything “controversial,” and thoughtless or irrelevant posts on social media as they can potentially threaten one’s brand.

As far as fit between personal and corporate brands, most respondents seemed to take it for granted. In contrast, some individuals thought personal branding offered an opportunity to broaden the corporate brand. For most European and some U.S. respondents, considering the issue of fit, the potential for damage to the corporate brand dominated their consideration. They
worried about harm that could come to the corporate image if postings by employees on social media antagonized customers or other stakeholders. Small firms were mentioned as particularly vulnerable to this and other instances of poor fit between personal and corporate brand.

Furthermore, our interviews suggested that managing a personal brand has at least two dimensions: (1) keeping it up to date given changing circumstances and (2) measuring its effectiveness. In regards to the first dimension, comments on the chameleon nature of a personal brand were common. Several individuals said their brand evolved over time or with shifting circumstances. For the second dimension, several measures of effective personal brands mentioned “how quickly are your calls answered” or “when you lose your job how quickly do you get another one.” Others were variations on sales success—referrals, repeat business—or variations on client success to which the respondent’s organizations contributed, or intangibles such as praise or endorsements from superiors.

Implications

Working from interviews intended to be only exploratory, we hesitate to generalize from our results. However, with the caution that we interviewed a small, non-random set of individuals, we did learn that strategic personal branding, intentionally matching values and competencies with the priorities of one’s organization and one’s customers, can pay off. That result leads to four recommendations.

Our first recommendation arises from the fact that those we interviewed created personal brands more often to demonstrate competence than to build relationships, but few set out to do both. We believe that ideally a personal brand should offer both of these pathways to success; therefore, we advise you to consider broadening your personal brand as doing so means broadening your strengths as well.

Secondly, beyond the need for individuals to monitor and moderate their own personal brands, companies need to be prepared to address employee personal brands in ways other than defensively. We note that companies may have dress codes, policies concerning behaviors like on-the-job smoking, drinking, talking to the press and/or social media use. However, because these issues are subsets of personal branding, managers might want to use that term, ask employees how they can be helpful, then offer coaching and sensitize employees to the realities of aligning personal and corporate brands. Managers should support employees in developing personal brands that benefit both the individual and the overarching organizational brand.
Third, we recommend flexibility when considering the relationship of personal brands and the corporate brand. While conflict between the two will help neither the individual nor the company, personal brands can enrich and stretch the corporate brand and should be encouraged to do so. Our last recommendation is for individuals to measure effectiveness of their personal brands and modify them when necessary. For salespeople, decreases in order sizes will prompt attention, but a decrease in referrals or even followers on social media may not. If such responses to a personal brand are perceived as valuable, tracking them becomes part of good management.

Conclusion

Does the brand you currently have communicate the right message? How can it be refined? How does it fit with your organization’s brand? As a real estate professional, developing your own brand is immensely valuable as, often times, especially if you are a solo agent, your personal identity is the full identity of your business. A well-defined and consistent personal brand can elevate agent recognition, generate leads, and build authority and credibility. It can also help you develop your unique value proposition, identify your target or ideal customers, catalyze word-of-mouth marketing, and humanize your marketing campaigns.

If your answers to the questions above revealed that your current brand is not the most effective, then take some time to evaluate how you can apply the results and recommendations of this study. As our investigation highlights, your brand should be created to establish competence and build relationships. It should be communicated not only through social media but through face-to-face communication as well. Lastly, it should be flexible and well aligned with the values of your customers and values of your overarching organization, if you are not an independent agent. Remember everyone has a personal brand, so it behooves us all to address the status of our own personal brand.

Recommended Reading


References


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Dr. Deva Rangarajan (PhD – University of Houston) worked for 14 years at Vlerick Business
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