

Embodying Your Personal Brand

Once you have gathered your source material, it is time to strategically rewrite your personal stories to present the best version of you. In doing so, you will be preparing yourself to enact and communicate your personal brand in everyday interactions. Your brand stories will take various forms but should all reflect your unique personal value proposition and be delivered in your most authentic brand voice, brimming with your distinct personality. Think of the following as the items you need to prepare for your personal brand media kit to help you stay on-brand as you navigate your life:

- Your personal bio or “about me” section that appears on your professional website or social media profiles,
- Your elevator pitch, a short synopsis of who you are and what you have to offer to others, which is often delivered “on-the-fly” when given the opportunity to pitch your value,
- Your professional resumé or curriculum vitae,
- The cover letters that you write when applying for a job,
- The interview answers you deliver in response to questions that begin with, “Tell me about a time when...,”
- The answer you deliver on a first date or when meeting someone socially for the first time in response to the question, “Tell me about yourself,”
- How you introduce yourself during a professional presentation or on the first day of a new job or when joining a new team,
- Your signature look or aspects of your physical appearance that communicate who you are,
- A signature phrase or habit that people will come to associate with you,
- The professional and personal photography and/or graphics you use to represent yourself,
- The online and offline content that you author, including social media posts, publications, podcasts, videos, speaking engagements, samples of your work, etc.,
- Your branded environment in which you immerse yourself, including your home, your office, your business card, your email signature, and your Zoom background,
- How you handle small talk.

Getting Beyond First Impressions

Whether you are aware of it or not, you advertise yourself all the time. People form opinions about you every day: in casual conversations, on dates, at parties, in job interviews. You tell people what you want them to hear about you – even if you do it subconsciously. Since they can only really evaluate what you show them, it is possible to take control over situations simply by being conscious of the messages you are sending. Consider the different signals you send when answering a simple question such as “How are you?” when meeting someone for the first time. If you reply, “I’m exhausted. Work was stressful today and traffic was terrible,” you are communicating both mundane and negative vibes. At a minimum, you missed a chance to reinforce your personal brand. But, if you reply with something more intentional, such as, “Actually, I had a really interesting day: I attended a lecture on the merits of reverse mentorship, which I can’t wait to implement at work,” then you are signaling intellectual curiosity or innovation, which could be consistent with your personal brand.

Good storytelling involves grabbing the attention of your listeners by making a positive first impression. First impressions matter – a lot – and this becomes problematic because they are often faulty. As you communicate your personal brand to a new audience member, keep in mind that:

- Pre-impressions are the new first impressions. How often do you search Google, Facebook, LinkedIn, or Instagram before meeting someone new? ALWAYS! Everyone is checking you

out online, too. The “first” impression of you is not when you actually make contact, it is when someone pulls up your Internet profiles and makes snap judgments from their screen. Rachel has seen thousands of singles reject a potential blind date after false assumptions they made from an Instagram page. Same thing happens in your career, especially from your LinkedIn profile.

- First impressions are formed instantaneously, usually after you have spoken only a few words or have been in someone’s presence a few seconds. People will make nearly instantaneous attributions about your level of education, economic status, trustworthiness, social desirability, and more. People’s attention spans are short, so if you do not initially grab someone’s interest, you will likely lose the opportunity to influence them. People do not wait to get to know you before passing judgment.
- Despite how quickly they are formed, first impressions linger, sometimes excessively long, and have an outsized impact on how you will be evaluated in the long run. A pesky dynamic called the primacy effect is at fault. The primacy effect is a cognitive bias in which the information we get about someone early on (often in the form of minor comments or small, seemingly meaningless behaviors) heavily influences how we interpret information about them later.
- First impressions often shut down possible relationships and opportunities, thus must be managed in ways that keep the door open for a second, third, and fourth interaction where you can more thoroughly reveal and better communicate the fullest expression of your personal brand. Think of your goal in a first interview or a first date not as landing the job or marrying the person, but rather as getting to the second round of interviews or securing a second date. That way, you get to decide if you want further interactions or not, rather than risking being ruled out involuntarily or unfairly.

First impressions are often formed during situations dominated by “small talk,” during which participants engage in surface-level conversation about generic things of little importance to their relationship, such as the weather or current events. Learning how to creatively translate your personal brand in response to the seemingly innocuous questions asked in these situations is critical to forming a strong first impression. Below are some strategies to help you leverage small talk into an opportunity to communicate your personal brand:

- Entice people to come over and talk to you during networking events by displaying something that will attract their attention and provide something to talk about, such as carrying a provocative book or the latest technological gadget, or wearing an unexpected and distinctive personal accessory. Display items in your workspace or home that speak to your personal brand to spark conversation, and keep your office door invitingly open.
- Most conversations open predictably with the same generic question: “How are you?” Then we leap to answer robotically: “Good, thanks!” But, “Good, thanks!” is the enemy of human connection. On first dates, at networking events, or in virtual meetings, there follows dull superficiality after “Good, thanks!” Instead, try spending 30 seconds right before meeting someone new and ask yourself, “What do I want to share about myself early on that’s most important?” And, then, respond to “How are you?” with something strategic like: “I’m doing great because my new trekking poles finally arrived today! I’m training to climb Kilimanjaro next summer.” That way, your early conversation banter could be about one of your authentic brand descriptors (e.g., *adventurous*) and your genuine core mission (e.g., *accomplishing big challenges*). Someone’s first impression will likely be that you have fortitude, energy, and big goals.

- Imagine that any question asked of you is an opener to communicate something about your personal brand. View the question as “a bid” to which you are asked to respond. For example, if someone comments on the current rainy weather, rather than responding with a generic, dull response such as “I know, it seems to be raining a lot,” which tends to end the conversation quickly, instead respond with something more interesting that reveals information about you, your interests, or your personality traits. For example, “Last time it rained like this, I was hiking Mt. Kilimanjaro and it took all of my determination and drive to keep going.” And then, propel the conversation forward with a follow up question that focuses on your partner, such as, “What’s your favorite rainy day adventure?”
- Utilize the “Yes, and...” technique from improvisational theater practice to keep conversations flowing by celebrating your partner’s ideas and adding your creativity to them. For example, if one of your personal brand descriptors is *ideator*, then when someone says, “Those California wildfires are out of control!”, you could reply, “Yes, and that makes me appreciate all those brave fire fighters. Hmm, I wonder what creative ideas we could dream up to thank those heroes?”
- The goal of a first impression is to be different and memorable. Marketing guru Seth Godin calls this idea a Purple Cow – a remarkable thing that stands out among the crowd.²⁰ In dating, singles suffer from swipe fatigue where thousands of profiles look the same (“I like movies and travel!”), and boring text exchanges leave everyone numb (“Where are you from?” ... “Dayton, how about you?” ... “Miami.” ... “Cool.”). The same goes with Zoom fatigue at work: we suffer snooze-fest interactions all day long. If you want to stand out when meeting a new recruiter, manager, or colleague virtually, get creative and make a unique impression to jolt them from their screen trance. Try picking an unexpected or thoughtful virtual icebreaker that is connected to your personal brand. If you are being interviewed for a job and one of your personal brand descriptors is *adventurous*, you could ask, “If you could be anywhere else today besides interviewing me, where would you be?” This question is likely to initiate discussion about your interviewer’s travel experiences or creative pursuits, which tees up an opportunity for you to share an adventure of your own, reinforcing a brand attribute that makes you unique.
- Your likability factor is higher when you demonstrate interest in your conversation partner. Rachel’s favorite dating tip for singles is to be more *interested* than *interesting*. People mistakenly think, in both dating and work, they have to impress someone early by trying to sound interesting and establish their credentials. However, a more effective approach is to express curiosity by asking thoughtful questions (without interrogating) to create connection and emotional bonding, which makes the other person like you. A great first impression ultimately is not factual (what you say), it is emotional (how the other person feels). Perhaps one of your personal brand descriptors is *compassionate*. Then, the next time you ask someone, “What do you do for a living?” try this response no matter what they say their job is, “Wow, that must be really hard.” This is a wonderful way to get someone to open up about their professional struggles, which we all have in every job. It will make them like you because you are someone who understands how hard things are for them, thus reinforcing your personal brand as compassionate.
- Create space for others and invite them into the conversation to amplify your personal brand among a wider circle of contacts.

Communicating Your Personal Brand Through Storytelling

It does not do any good to simply define your personal brand on a piece of paper. Once you have created your personal brand media kit, it is time to strategize and execute your plan for communicating your brand to important others through storytelling. You need to make sure everyone around you knows it.

Many people tell us they are uncomfortable promoting themselves. This is likely because many of us were raised to be modest and demure about our assets. Braggarts are never well liked. But, all you are really doing here is communicating what makes you different and valuable, not what makes you great. This is not bragging or acting smug, but rather helping people create a shortcut to frame you in their minds. You need to get comfortable with the fact that advertising yourself is okay. Your advertising campaign is about putting your best foot forward to get the initial attention of the people who matter to you or who might matter to you in the future.

Your first goal is increasing your brand awareness with your core audiences, followed quickly by deepening brand knowledge in those nascent relationships. While everything you are and do will contribute to the enactment of your personal brand, you will also want to consider how you will leverage various media to help spread your stories. Think about how you will use owned, earned, and paid media platforms to expose people to your stories with the value you might offer to them. Examples of each might be:

- *Owned media* includes your social media profiles, your professional and personal websites, and the organic audiences generated by any of your produced content, such as podcasts, videos, blogs, books, speaking engagements, and other publications, etc. As you strategize, think about how you can create and manage new platforms for spreading your personal brand stories and disseminate meaningful content to attract new audiences to you via inbound marketing.
- *Earned media* includes press mentions of you in public media; recommendations and ratings of your work on LinkedIn or other platforms; retweets, likes, and comments on your social media content; or introductions, referrals, and references that others are willing to provide for you;
- *Paid media* includes anything you do to increase your exposure by paying others to help you reach new audiences, such as the hiring of executive search consultants or matchmakers, speaking bureaus or agents, paid social media advertising, paid influencer marketing, and other pay-to-play speaking engagements or publication opportunities.

Socializing Your Brand

Personal brands are imagined by one person (you) but socialized by many, as consumer researchers Susan Fournier and Giana Eckhardt remind us that, “a large part of the cultural meaning of a human brand stems from what others reveal about the brand to the public”.²¹ Thus, it is important to include others in your communication efforts to encourage them to co-create meaning for your personal brand, and to help you disseminate it widely through their social networks. You should actively enlist gatekeepers, influencers, promoters, and members of important brand communities to help you realize your personal brand.

- *Gatekeepers* include people who hold the keys to your future success and without whom you will find it difficult to achieve your mission. Gatekeepers might include admissions officers at the school of your dreams, judges for important awards for which you are vying, or search

committee members for a new position. The online and offline press often serves an important gatekeeping role as they choose whom to feature or highlight as an expert within their content.

- *Influencers* include people with specialized knowledge, expertise, authority, social position, and/or personal relationships that enable them to have influence over others. Influencers have active and engaged audiences of their own and can provide you with an additional media platform to publish your own content. They also can lend you credibility and grant you legitimacy as they recommend or rate you. Even without their expressed endorsement, you benefit from your mere associations with them as they lend you their social cachet.
- *Promoters* are people who are actively invested in your success and who help facilitate your communication of your personal brand. They might include professional mentors, recruiters, bosses, friends who will share their contacts with you, and acquaintances who will set you up on blind dates.
- *Personal Brand Communities* are online or offline special interest groups, clubs, or marketplaces to which you can belong. Within these social contexts, you can find others like you who either share your mission or crave the value you are able to provide. They might share your interests and/or skill sets or occupy the same type of job you're seeking. Dating sites, trade groups, job boards, and alumni clubs are examples of personal brand communities that can help you engage with a wide audience.

Each of these types of people make up your personal brand ecosystem. At the center lies your target market, the people to whom you would like to deliver value. Surrounding them are important others who can facilitate your value delivery by introducing you to your target market, by providing information about you to them, or by endorsing or recommending you. Personal branding consultant Franziska Schaadt explains,

Personal branding is not about simply telling others who you are – but more importantly, about building relationships with others by sharing your values and experiences...When you're present both online and offline with your values and strengths, others can get to know you better, find common ground or discover interesting aspects of your life and work that they want to talk to you about. This is how a relationship is formed without you even really talking to the people.²²