Navigating Personal Branding Pitfalls

Managing a personal brand can be tricky. Here are eight pitfalls to reflect upon:

Underdeveloped or insufficient branding. Some people make a conscious choice to reveal minimal personal information about themselves in both face-to face conversations or on online platforms. They often place their desire for privacy above the value of strategically crafting and implementing a personal brand. Yet, in today's environment of inflated egos and poseurs, people need to know that you are legitimate before they can trust you. Thus, an absence of information about your personal brand can result in people attributing false conclusions about you. If you do not create the brand you want, someone else will do it for you and you probably will not like it. We are not saying that you need to divulge your deepest feelings and secrets to the world, but striking a reasonable balance between privacy and projecting a strategic image is important for success in both personal and professional contexts.

Others err by failing to differentiate their brand from people like them, leaving their brand to exist in a sea of sameness. For example, in her work with matchmaking clients, Rachel often hears people describe themselves as "I'm nice, smart, and honest." She challenges them to evolve these somewhat generic traits into something more memorable and distinctive, such as "I have Midwestern values, intellectual curiosity, and I'm a great secret-keeper."

As personal branding becomes a more important asset in today's social media world, the media channels for personal branding have become cluttered. Explains journalist Ann Friedman, "Blogging, tweeting, posting to Facebook and Instagram, optimizing your personal web site and LinkedIn profile to explain what makes you unique – none of this is enough to distinguish you from anyone else, because everyone else is also doing all of these things. Branding yourself might be easier than ever, but it's getting harder and harder to stand out."[26] Finding new media channels (both online and offline) for promoting your brand and ensuring that your brand messages stand out is crucial to avoid your brand getting lost in the crowd.

Cleaning up inconsistencies. Online impressions matter and most people have multiple profiles on different social media platforms that reflect different identities and goals. Your LinkedIn profile probably looks quite different from your Instagram or Hinge profiles. Moreover, Google search results with your name are probably quite random and diverse. Additionally, a face-to-face meeting with you

might be disconcerting if your online profile photographs are a decade old. What can you do to clean up and manage this array of inconsistent branding? First, try to streamline your personal brand so that your core attributes and value claims are consistent across professional and personal platforms, even as they might vary in the tone that is appropriate to each medium. For example, signaling the fact that you are an elite athlete might be stated on your LinkedIn biography as "A team player who thrives in a competitive environment," on Instagram via photos of you scoring goals on a playing field, and on your dating profile as response to the question prompt, "The key to my heart is ____" with this witty retort, "…knowing which team Daniel Alves played for in the 2021 Olympics". Then, actively manage your online presence by untagging yourself in off-brand social media posts, tightening your account privacy, and deleting old posts that could result in misinterpreted brand messaging.

However, it is important to note one fundamental difference between personal and product brands in terms of the value of inconsistency. When an existing product brand looks to add new meanings through line or brand extensions or repositioning, researchers point to the importance of "fit" and discourage brands from adding incongruous associations.[27] For human brands, revealing something unexpected about yourself that does not fit with your audiences' expectations of who you are might add an element of excitement and intrigue to your relationship. It is often when people act in ways that defy the stereotyped image we hold of them that they become most interesting. As Johnson relates, "Personal branding is about being yourself out loud. When we are truly ourselves, we contradict the norms, confuse people, intrigue them, and shift their thinking by shifting their perspectives."[28] For example, when I sense that someone in a social setting might be intimidated by my position as a Harvard Business School professor, I sometimes reveal that I used to be a cheerleader or a bartender, two seemingly incongruous alter-identities that put people more at ease.

Balancing competence with warmth. Competence alone is not enough, as personal brands are, well personal. So, when filtering how you want people to see you, it is important to emphasize your unique personality traits (e.g., loyal, meticulous), as well as your hard skills and experiences (e.g., SEO marketing, coding).The Warmth/Competence Matrix[29] is a leadership paradigm that emphasizes the interplay between the head and the heart when it comes to how others will form and retain their impression of you. An effective personal brand must engender balanced measures of respect (for your skills) and likability (for your attractive personality traits). Social psychologist Amy Cuddy warns, "Unfortunately, we often make the mistake in work situations of showing off our skills and our strengths before showing we are trustworthy."[30] Another industry insider agreed, "Competencies alone don't make for a strong personal brand. We also want … our leaders to be trustworthy… qualities like honesty, fairness, decency, humility and empathy."[31] Someone who has high competence but low warmth may be very smart, but if nobody wants to work with them, they will struggle to be an effective leader or teammate. Someone who has low competence but high warmth may be adored, but inept at getting the job done. In other words, if you are known for your brilliant financial skills but no one invites you out for drinks after work, your personal brand may not be as effective as it could be.

Embracing your blemishes. Often, impression management prompts us to conceal those things about ourselves that others might find unappealing. However, sometimes it is those things that most connect us to others. Advises Tombrakos, "Your story is not blemish free…Many of us think that in telling our story we should only reveal the picture perfect version of ourselves. We forget that it's the scars and bumps in the road that make us interesting. The key is learning how to tell it in a way that works for you so you can get to whatever is next."[32]

So, how should you handle something that might be perceived as a negative trait? You have a few options: you could 1.) own it as the thing that makes you "you," and flaunt it, which can often be quite disarming, 2.) try to reframe it from a negative to a positive, 3.) temper the shock someone might feel

when your negative trait is revealed by telling them about it in advance of them discovering it themselves, or 4.) lower someone's expectations about it before they meet you. For example, think about how model Lauren Hutton's gap in her front teeth, a physical trait some would deem to be less than ideal, became her signature look and helped her stand out in the sea of sameness of the fashion world. Or, how celebrity chef Rachel Ray reframed her lack of culinary training as the key to her success –being relatable to average cooks–as she branded herself with the slogan, "beer in a bottle, not champagne in a flute".[33] Consider how someone who others perceive as timid and quiet in meetings can reframe that perception by portraying themselves as an open, generous, and wise listener who considers all perspectives before jumping in to make a recommendation.

Handling human unpredictability. With the nature of personal brands being human, there is inherent unpredictability that occurs over time between who you are and what you do. No one can be consistent and behave "on brand" 100% of the time. As Fournier and Eckhardt note, "What makes human brands different from other brands? It is their very humanness – the physical and social realities, mental biases and limitations of being human – that introduces risk while generating the ability for enhanced returns."[34] Don't constrain yourself too tightly, and allow yourself to be unpredictably human. Advises Jack Canfield, author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, "As you begin to take action toward the fulfillment of your goals and dreams, you must realize that not every action will be perfect. Not every action will produce the desired result. Not every action will work. Making mistakes, getting it almost right, and experimenting to see what happens are all part of the process of eventually getting it right."[35]

Reconciling our multiple selves. We all have sides of ourselves that look different in our personal versus professional lives, and we change our behavior depending on the people we are with, moods we are in, and situations we encounter. For example, you might be hard charging at work, but more laid back at home. Alternatively, you might have a strategic reason for segmenting your personal and professional brand audiences (e.g., you are a trusted accountant on weekdays, but an edgy podcast host on weekends). The chameleon nature of human brands is not so much a flaw, but rather a reminder to identify consistent characteristics that reflect who you are at your core (honest, outgoing, and creative) to anchor the fluidity of your multiple selves across platforms and audiences.

Staying authentic. You are not alone if you worry that personal branding is putting a positive spin on how you come across and, therefore, presenting an inauthentic version of yourself to others. How do you balance putting your best foot forward with radical candor about who you really are? Remember that personal branding is not designed to fully and accurately describe yourself to others; rather, it is a strategy to cut through the noise and draw the right people and opportunities toward you—like a magnet. Your personal brand helps you highlight what makes you unique in a positive way. Later, as people get to know you better in the workplace or in a social setting, they will peel back the layers of the onion to understand a well-rounded view of you.

It is worth noting that your worries about the authenticity of your personal brand can also stem from "imposter syndrome." If so, consider whether it is time to let go of outdated self-doubts in order to create space for new relationships and opportunities that reflect who you are today. If the imposter syndrome persists, consider whether you have the emotional bandwidth to project your intended personal brand. Shelly Lazarus, a branding expert and former CEO of Ogilvy, warns, "If you're spending every hour of the day pretending to be someone [you think] you're not, you'll be exhausted and won't have the energy needed to face your real work. On the flip side, if you're genuinely excited about what you're doing, and have that light in your eyes, it will attract other people to you, and motivate them."[36]

Managing brand crises. There will likely come a time in your personal brand journey where crises, criticisms, misunderstandings, or rumors will plague your reputation. What should you do when this happens? First, know that you are not alone and that there are many successful human turnaround stories for inspiration if you feel hopeless about an off-brand image failure. Think about how the personal brands of Tiger Woods or Martha Stewart both needed serious rehabilitation after they faced criminal charges for domestic violence and insider trading respectively. Consider how the founder and CEO of Amazon Jeff Bezos rebranded himself as a successful space entrepreneur and astronaut not long after nude photos from his marital infidelity leaked online. While those examples involved celebrities, we mortals also sometimes misbehave while trying to maintain a carefully constructed image.

Whether your path to rehabilitation and redemption involves hiring a reputation management consultant or simply deleting an unbecoming Facebook post, the common denominators for refocusing public perception to the brand you want to portray usually include sincerity, humility, and taking immediate personal accountability. Forgive yourself for minor digressions from your brand and move forward. For any major missteps, offer heartfelt, immediate apologies and then do what it takes to regain trust and faith in your brand. Then, see what you can do to clean up your online image. A personal branding coach recommends, "If you want to scrub some of the blemishes on your online identity… [action steps might include] privatiz[ing] your social media accounts… ask[ing] the webmaster of [certain] pages to remove the information… bury[ing] the dirt [by pushing information to the third or fourth pages of Google search results by adding LinkedIn posts or answering questions on Quora], and hav[ing] colleagues write blogs or articles about you in an appealing light."[37]