

## The Value of a Personal Brand

Personal branding is an intentional and strategic value-signifying practice during which you define and express your own value proposition – what you are uniquely positioned to offer to others by addressing their needs and creating value in their lives. As Arruda describes, “Your personal brand is your unique promise of value. It’s what those around you expect from you – what you’re known for. Just as Volvo is known for safety and Apple is known for ‘thinking different,’ your personal brand ensures that you’re recognized and appreciated for the relevant and compelling value you provide.”<sup>3</sup>

Just like product and service brands, your personal brand, although carefully curated and shepherded by you, gains equity only when it exists in the minds of others, who contribute to and shape its meaning. Although we often believe that we own and are in complete control of our personal brands, Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, reminds us, “Your brand is what people say about you when you’re not in the room.”<sup>4</sup> Your *personal brand* is the amalgamation of the associations, beliefs, emotions, attitudes, and expectations other people collectively hold about you that coalesce into narratives about your value. Strategically managing your personal brand ensures that this narrative is memorable, coherent, compelling, differentiated, and motivational to the people who are important to you. Just like a brand that adorns a company’s product or service, your personal brand shapes how people understand, experience, value, and relate to you. It can be either an asset or a liability.

Sociologist Erving Goffman describes the process of creating and enacting our personal brands in theatrical terms, in which each of us lives much like an actor on a stage, dressed in a rotating series of costumes, delivering scripted and rehearsed lines on highly staged sets, where we allow others to see only those parts of ourselves that we strategically choose to display as our public personae, while keeping much of who we actually are, undressed and sans makeup, backstage and hidden from view.<sup>5</sup> Using Goffman's analogy, personal branding includes both *the preparation* for the performance, during which you plan, build, and practice your personal brand, and *the enactment of the performance*, where you embody your personal brand during social interactions with others (both online and in person) and concurrently receive and responded to feedback from an audience. The audience thus is a critical stakeholder, as their response to the performance of your personal brand either endorses or challenges its meaning.

Through this lens, personal branding is both a self-reflective and social-reflexive practice, where you attempt to make sense of who you are by creating a personal narrative, and then you negotiate the social acceptance of that personal narrative in real time through interactions with others. The thousands of tiny choices you make in the moments of social interaction propel your personal brand along an evolutionary path. Your personal brand is reflective of your current behavior and appearance, past accomplishments and experiences, and the immediate and long-lasting emotional response you incite in others, and thus is a story that signals both your competence and your character. As personal branding coach Joanne Tombrakos notes, "Your story is the reputation you've built, where you've been and where you'd like to go. It's your work experience, your sense of style, where you went to school, the skills you've honed, your sense of humor, and the places you've traveled to. It's every move you've made, every social media post you've shared and every nuance that has gotten you to where you are now."<sup>6</sup> Understanding your personal brand helps others more ably predict your future behaviors, reducing the risk of interpersonally interacting with you. It also allows them to subconsciously evaluate the opportunity cost of spending their valuable time with someone else.

What is the value of strategically managing your personal brand? Several benefits accrue to those with well-developed and managed personal brands, including:

- Enhancing your visibility by moving you from obscurity to some level of recognition and/or fame, particularly among those who are important to you and to the achievement of your goals,
- Enhancing how memorable you are,
- Enabling you to fit in to a social arena by communicating your legitimacy,
- Communicating your competitive edge, what makes you different and better than others, so that you can stand out in a crowded field,
- Establishing you as a credible expert in certain areas,
- Expanding your network of connections,
- Attracting new opportunities in both professional and personal settings, such as job offers, promotions, clients, investments, dates, friendships, etc.,
- Uncovering, celebrating, and sharing your unique value that you offer to the world.

What is the risk of not managing your personal brand? Beyond the obvious difficulties you will have in selling yourself, neglecting to manage your personal brand leaves you at the whim of others,

who will be co-authoring your personal brand in your absence. As personal branding coach Cynthia Johnson warns, “Having a personal brand is inescapable. If you don’t build and manage your brand, the world around you will do it for you, and you will be putting your future in the hands of others.”<sup>7</sup> She continues, noting that in a world where everyone will instantly Google you before they meet you, “Having no personal brand can be just as damaging as having a bad one,”<sup>8</sup> claiming, “We all have a brand already; people have an opinion of us, much of it shaped by what they find and read online – or don’t. We need to take back our stories, edit them, rewrite them, and improve them. We can be the narrators of our own digital stories, just as we have historically been the writers of our own resumes.”<sup>9</sup> Oprah Winfrey, a woman with an incredibly valuable and well-defined personal brand says it more succinctly, “You define your own life. Don’t let others write your script.”<sup>10</sup>

The bottom line is that a personal brand is your personal asset. Curating and shepherding it smartly will open up more opportunities for you in life.

## The Personal Branding Process

Personal branding is an intentional and strategic design and execution process that contains seven steps (see **Exhibit 1**). Each step informs the others, creating a personal journey that is ongoing as you move through strategizing your personal brand, testing it out in interpersonal interactions, and renegotiating it to reflect social feedback. Along the way, you will incorporate learnings from self-discovery. Hence, most people enjoy and benefit from the process of personal branding, as the self-reflection that is required yields a greater sense of self and a celebration of the things that makes you special. Each step in the sequential process is outlined below:

1. **Visioning:** The first step in a personal branding process is to create a long-term vision and mission for your brand. This will help you establish your personal purpose – what difference you would like to make in the world for the various audiences who are important to you, both personally and professionally – and the values you would like to embody as you pursue that mission.
2. **Auditing:** Once you have established your vision, mission, and purpose, and values, it is time to understand the existing personal brand that you have carved out over your life thus far. A brand audit helps you identify and analyze the brand you are today, so that you can fruitfully build upon this foundation as you renegotiate your brand for the future.
3. **Storyscaping:** Once you have a handle on your existing brand, it is time to uncover, refine, and craft the stories that you will use to communicate your personal brand. Your personal brand stories will reflect, embrace (or reject), and expound upon all of your past experiences to sketch out a roadmap for the future. Using archetypal characters and universal storylines, you will use storyscaping to tell your story both narratively and visually across various personal branding formats to persuade others.
4. **Embodying:** Once your stories are imagined, it is time to begin living them as you embody your personal brand in everyday interactions. Each social interaction you have, with both intimates and strangers, has the opportunity to evolve your personal brand closer to or further from your ideal brand. Thus, learning how to authentically and comfortably enact your brand socially in day-to-day interactions is an important skill to master.
5. **Storytelling:** Every personal brand needs a media plan that specifies the media channels through which you will communicate your brand to others. The goal is to make your brand as

discoverable as possible, raising brand awareness and deepening brand knowledge about yourself with audiences, both personal and professional, who are important to your mission. Vulnerability and appropriate levels of self-disclosure within the context are key.

6. **Socializing:** Personal branding is never done in isolation; other people are critical components of your storytelling strategy. Others lend you credibility and grant legitimacy. They help you expand your reach with new audiences as they share your personal brand content throughout their own networks. Here, you enlist gatekeepers, influencers, promoters, and people who form the central hubs of important communities to help you promote your personal brand.
7. **Renegotiating:** As you move through life, you will need to regularly renegotiate your personal brand, as you gain skills, experiences, and relationships, and as the external context changes around you. Navigating and learning to mitigate the pitfalls that we all face in personal branding is an ongoing journey, as is the reengineering of self that involves constantly perceiving how your personal brand is received by others and pivoting to increase personal effectiveness.