

Storyscaping Your Personal Brand

Once you have tested your personal value proposition and learned about your existing personal brand equity, it is time to begin “storyscaping” your brand. Storyscaping involves determining how to “package” the credentials, social capital, cultural capital, physical capital, and personality that you possess into personal narratives that you will use to communicate the value you can provide to important audiences. Remember that a brand is not just a jumble of attributes floating in the minds of consumers, rather, it is a vessel of meaning, containing the set of narratives that you have communicated and that your consumers have processed and made sense of that deliver personalized meaning to them. Here, we must translate our brand attributes or descriptors into more fully formed stories. As personal branding researchers note, “success is not determined by individuals’ internal sets of skills, motivations, and interests, but, rather, by how effectively they are arranged, crystallized and labeled – in other words, branded.”¹⁵ Turning your personal value proposition into compelling stories helps increase the memorability, emotional resonance, relevance, accessibility, persuasiveness, and trust of your personal brand. Stories transform your brand from a rational appeal, i.e., a dry list of previous accomplishments, into an emotionally engaging experience for your audiences. As Tombrakos advises, “It’s not our resumé or a long list of our skills and experience, but the story of how that all came to be that connects us with other humans.”¹⁶

The stories of our life so far provide fodder for our personal brand storytelling and should be mined for source material that can support our personal value proposition. This ensures that our personal brand narratives are grounded in reality and not so fantastical that they will be deemed unbelievable. Remember that every good story contains four essential elements:

- A strong *ideological message or moral lesson* often permeates the most memorable stories. These essential truths or deeper meanings are the guideposts of learning and motivate reflection and action. The message defines the central premise of the story and the successful resolution of the story proves its veracity.
- *Identifiable and unforgettable characters* often populate our favorite stories. Characters who are like us or represent the types of people we aspire to be grab our attention and elicit empathy.

Think about how you can make your personal brand more accessible and likeable to others – make yourself the hero everyone wants to be rooting for.

- *Conflict* is the driving force in good stories; it provides energy and forward movement. It compels heroes into action and serves up insurmountable difficulties for heroes to overcome. Memorable stories often contain battles between good and evil, underdogs battling top dogs, or new ideas toppling old paradigms. A story’s conflict can arise from external conditions, internal states, or philosophical dilemmas.
- Good stories are dynamic and progress along an evolutionary path. Often, a *well-orchestrated plot* first draws the audience in with an exciting opening that sets the scene, then introduces tension that increases engagement and commitment, then develops characters to bring the audience closer to them, then moves the tension to a climax, and finally provides a release of the tension that soothes and delights.

As you sift through the thousands of stories that capture your lived existence to date and those that you can imagine in your desired path forward given your future ambitions, be on the lookout for ones that connect with the core themes of your mission. Look for those stories that deliver a moral or lesson that is relevant to your important audiences, and look for those in which you exhibit the critical attributes that you have identified as necessary to credibly deliver it. For example, stories about your past achievements in sports can be used to support your claims of perseverance, or stories about how you have worked to support yourself since age ten can be used to support your claims of a strong work ethic. Be alert for archetypal plots and archetypal characters, which serve as symbolic shortcuts, evoke deep emotions, and promote empathy, making them powerful tools in a brand storyteller’s arsenal.

Try to remember those stories that represent the authentic you, times when you have felt most alive, positive, and productive. Search for stories that help you stand out from others, where your uniqueness made the difference between success and failure. Are there any stories in which you exhibit an archetypal character’s traits and advantages? In her consulting work, Hogshead has identified 49 personality archetypes that encapsulate the various ways people fascinate others: through combinations of power, passion, mystique, prestige, alertness, innovation, and trust (see **Exhibit 5**). Which ones best describe you and how can you most effectively harness their archetypal storytelling power?^b My personal brand audit revealed that my most powerful archetype is the *Maestro*, while Rachel’s is the *Intrigue*.

As you sift through your past, also look for negative archetypes that you embody that might be holding you back. Each of Hogshead’s personal archetypes unfortunately has the potential for a negative twin, which usually rears its head when its characteristic behaviors are taken to the extreme. For example, the *Maestro* can be accused of being the *Control Freak* if he or she tries to direct things too tightly (an archetype I’m afraid my husband might recognize in me at times!). And, the *Intrigue* can easily become the *Drama* if his or her sensitivity and consideration of others is perceived as overly emotive.

As you look for your competitive differentiation, beware of falling into the “better trap”. As Hogshead warns,

We grew up with a myth. The myth says: Try harder to be ‘better’. Be better than everyone else...The reality is that ‘better’ is not better. Better is a mirage. It keeps you

^b To learn more about how to determine which of the 49 personality archetypes best captures you, see Hogshead, Sally (2014) *How the World Sees You: Discover Your Highest Value through the Science of Fascination*, New York: Harper Business.

chained to the same way of working as your competition. Better is temporary. Better is a flimsy edge that can be toppled in a millisecond by someone with a bigger following, a lower price, a more convenient location, a fancier degree, a shinier award, a newer technology, a more skillful skill. Better is not always better. Sometimes, it's worse...Different is better than better. Different doesn't try to turn you into something else. Different allows you to highlight the singular traits you already have within you.¹⁷

Do not avoid life stories in which you have stumbled; sometimes, these types of stories are the most resonant, as they illustrate to your audience how much you have learned from adversity and how you have incorporated those lessons into how you will live your life going forward. Remember that one of the most prevalent story structures across cultures and time is *The Hero's Journey*, in which flawed central characters, known as *heroes*, face insurmountable obstacles that stand in the way of reaching critical goals. Think *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Star Wars*. Spurred into action by conflict and forced to leave familiar surroundings, they set out on a journey, during which they acknowledge their personal deficits, face their fears, and work to acquire the necessary skills to overcome the obstacles that await them. Along their challenging journeys, heroes are both assisted and thwarted by others, but manage to prevail and are transformed by their struggles into better versions of themselves.

Where in your life have you embarked on a *Hero's Journey*? *The Hero's Journey* narrative arc allows you to package your personal stories to showcase both your achievements and the arduous journey you encountered to reach them. It allows you to tell your story in a way that demonstrates grit, perseverance, personal growth, and with the humility that comes from the recognition of one's challenges. As personal branding researchers have noted, "The more an individual is able to communicate a 'lesson learnt,' the more (s)he will be able to build reputation. Expressive individuality builds reputation by explicitly providing a gist, a moral. The more the story can communicate a metaphoric, symbolic story, the more power the story will have to engage others."¹⁸ They continue, "Powerful storytelling also means being able to evoke and manage tension. Memorable stories generally deal, in fact, with the fundamental conflict between subjective expectations and cruel reality but are solved by the protagonist's determination and will power."¹⁹

As you develop your stories, assess them against the following criteria to ensure that you are building an effective brand:

- Does the brand story ring true to who you are, both as you see yourself and as others see you?
- Does the brand story appeal to the right people in your important audiences?
- Is the brand story memorable and unique?
- Does the brand story position you to make the difference you wish to make in the world?