**YOUR PERSONAL BRAND**

For Baby Boomers, it’s weird to think about having a personal brand. We grew up with brands: peanut butter brands, coffee brands, car brands. By creating a personal brand it’s like we’re designating ourselves as products, with a logo sticker and an expiration date. And in a sense, we are.

Back in the day, we didn’t need personal brands. We just had reputations. Your co-workers, social circles and family knew your reputation. But unless you were some kind of public figure — or someone who waxed eloquent on the bathroom wall — your reputation wasn’t widely known.

You were known for your accomplishments as well as the way you treated other people. It was crucial that others noticed your good work. If you sat in the corner, did a good job and kept your nose clean, you still might remain invisible to the organization. Only if you worked on a critical piece of the project would anyone outside of your immediate team know what you did. Your reputation was known mostly within your group, team or project. If you moved from project to project, your reputation often followed you.

Let’s fast forward to the 21st century. With the rise of the internet and social media came the concept of personal brand. Now, if you have a Facebook or Twitter account, you have a reputation not only with friends and family, but things you post might also be reposted before strangers. If you take strong political stands, then you’re known as a community-minded person or a blowhard, depending on the perspective of the person who sees your posts. If you post your daily activities and photos of all your meals, that may communicate you have too much time on your hands, are lonely or need validation. If you post off-color jokes, that tells people something about you, too.

These days, everyone is so busy, there is so much information available, that the only way to get seen by the people you want to recognize you is to create a visible presence. If you don’t, the next guy will, and you’ll be overlooked.

Interestingly, not having social media accounts also says something about you. These days, if people Google you and you have no online presence, it can communicate that you are:

1. Too much of an old fuddy-duddy to participate in contemporary society or
2. Hiding something.

Being invisible online means you’re not part of the conversation. And if you’re trying to pivot your career, not having a LinkedIn account is like sending out your resume in invisible ink. LinkedIn is where people connect over work. If you’re not there, with a strong personal brand, the people who could get you where you want to be may never find you.

I hate the new world order!

Many of you may be saying, “I do not have time for this! All this posting and reputation building and interacting with people about things I barely care about!”

I get where you’re coming from, but unfortunately, you probably have to make time. Learning to navigate the social media world is like learning to use the internet. You can’t operate effectively without it. But you only have to use the parts of it that actually serve your purpose. You don’t have to post pictures of your lunch, for instance.

Many of you may also be really uncomfortable with promoting yourself. Growing up, many of us were taught that self-promotion is improper. We were assured that we just needed to work hard to be recognized and that any effort to attract attention to ourselves was immodest. Women were especially taught that lesson, and were shocked by books like "Games Mother Never Taught You: Corporate Gamesmanship for Women” that came out in 1977 saying women needed to go after their share of recognition to get ahead in the corporate world. Dan Schawbel’s "Promote Yourself" is a modern counter to that modesty training.

The good news is that if you make an effort, you can be seen and recognized by people you never had the opportunity to reach before. The question is, what message do you want to reach them with? What’s your personal brand?

**YOUR BRAND STORY**

Where does your brand story come from? From you. When I meet a client, he tells me his story. Where he grew up, how he grew up, where he worked, jobs he’s had, which ones he liked and which he hated and why. I can always hear threads that run through his story. As a recovering engineer — one of my brand statements — I recognize patterns.

One client I have is a product manager. All his life, he’s loved taking other people's visions and making them happen. Even before becoming a product manager, he ran an annual parade and created floats that other people designed. He was, he realized, the vision enabler. He brings ideas into focus and makes them a reality.

But even though he knew some of this, when I repeated it back to him after he told me his story, he could see himself from a new perspective. He understood himself in a way he hadn’t before. And it helped him define the extra value he brings to organizations he works for—his brand.

Your story isn’t your resume. It is who you are, not what you have done. It should convey what you stand for, your morals and values, your personality and passions.

I have taken several online programs that were supposed to help me develop a brand story. What I discovered was that I was really lousy at creating and writing my own brand story. I’ve had a couple clients work this online process, too, but they did not do any better. In fact, most didn’t finish. Why is this?

Part of it is that many of us are uncomfortable with what feels like excessive navel- gazing. But the other piece is, we do not see ourselves the way other people see us! Most of us have huge blind spots when it comes to our reputations. We need other people to reflect what they see before we can really understand our brands.

The worst person to write your brand story is you!

Do marketing professionals sit quietly in a room by themselves and dream up brand ideas? No! They collaborate. They brainstorm and bounce ideas off one another. When working on your brand and story, get outside help and feedback. I work with clients in a systematic way to develop their brand stories:

**FIND YOUR THEMES**

We all have themes running through our lives. But many of us have difficulty seeing those themes. We are just too close! Work with a good friend, relative or even a career professional who can help you identify your themes. Talk about your story and don’t edit! See what threads the other person sees running through your life.

Frequently, your story may have one pivotal moment. For me, it was my bicycle accident. For one of my clients, it was taking ballet as a teenager.

Sometimes, really honest people may see things you’re not real thrilled about — like that you’ve always had personality conflicts with the boss or that you’ve quit jobs too often or stayed in them long after you knew you hated them. Face those things too. Don’t fall prey to your blind spots. This may be a bit painful, but our greatest lessons and later victories are often tied to experiences that came out of dark times.

On the other hand, just because it’s an outside perspective doesn’t mean it’s accurate. Only seek this help from someone you trust and make sure what the other person is saying resonates with you.

**LABEL YOURSELF**

Work with the same people who helped you develop a theme to create a label that defines you. Have fun with this! Ask friends questions like "What words describe me?" and "If I were an animal, which animal would I be?"

Think about brand slogans like Nike's “Just Do It,” “You’re in Good Hands With Allstate” or Capital One's “What’s In Your Wallet?” Your label is your personal tagline. It has to be very tight. Think of it as the line at the top of your LinkedIn profile: That’s only 200 characters.

Find the statement that accurately describes you and then look for the perfect words. I had great fun with a client looking through the thesaurus to come up with the label “I am the confluence of business and art.”

Another client loves making things happen and making dreams come true for people. I told her she should be “the fairy godmother.” But for her, that conjured up pictures of Disney's "Cinderella." To her, “fairy godmother” said “purple and fat.” So we had to find a different brand label. We finally came up with “the playmaker.” She likes to make the plays. She could have been “the quarterback.”

Even when you get an accurate label, it may feel a little uncomfortable at first — like a new haircut. The question is, does it really tell people, in a few words, what your big value-add is?

Label yourself with a phrase that is memorable. For instance, I used to refer to myself as an articulate techno-weenie, but I now refer to myself as a recovering engineer.

A client of mine has created this label: “I’m a cause-driven, people-oriented geek.” Your story and label should enforce what you want people to remember about you. Come up with a memorable phrase that authentically says who you are. You don’t want marketing that sounds great but doesn’t really tell who you are. Find a group of your friends who can brainstorm on the topic and share what they think is a true expression of who you are and what you bring to the table. Come up with 20-30 phrases, and then test them out vocally. You have to be comfortable using the phrase.

For my client who loves to create order out of chaos we came up with “structured anarchist.”

Ultimately, you’re creating your brand to share with the world so you can attain the career you want. But this exercise can also be really great at just clarifying and validating what you’ve been learning and producing thus far in your career and life — what your value is to the places where you contribute. And that, alone, is a great reason to take the plunge and find your brand.

***ACTION STEPS:***

* Find someone who can help you with your brand story. This could be a friend, relative or paid professional.
* Brainstorm with this person on what should be the common theme for your brand story.
* Allow someone else to write or co-write your brand story.

For additional resources, check out:

Repurpose Your Career Resource Center <https://careerpivot.com/RYC-Resources/>