

Be your own brand

Michelle Daniels describes how to build a good reputation into a personal brand.

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Personal brands aren't exclusive to celebrities who command massive followings on social media and regularly feature in the press. We see them very much evident in business too, in the form of colleagues, contacts and clients who are often regarded as a 'go-to' person and stand apart from their peers.

Over recent years there's been much debate about the commercial value and impact of personal brands in a business. Fuelled by research findings (such as Weber Shandwick's which found 44% of a company's market value is directly linked to a CEO's personal brand), the discussion has prompted firms and individual professionals alike to assess the merits of a personal branding approach.

What is it and how can it help professionals attract clients?

At a basic level a personal brand helps a professional to stand out in their field. Done well (and yes it needs to have a strategy and plan behind it) it can differentiate them from others doing what they do.

And with much choice available for every purchase and need, the credibility and reassurance that a personal brand brings can encourage people to then favour that specific professional when they need the expertise, insight, approach, skill, etc which they are synonymous with.

But why the recent rise in popularity in personal branding? To answer this, we need to consider changes in client buying behaviour.



Personal branding isn't about being highly visible on social media. Instead it's about what your message and underpinning point of difference is, which is then shared via the channels your audience favours.

The popularity of a personal brand

Over recent years clients have been undertaking greater research when approaching and selecting an adviser. This movement isn't exclusive to professional services and is happening with both private client and business buyers across many sectors.

Included in the clients' research is often a check of the adviser's 'social proof' – for example canvassing recommendations and checking out reviews and testimonials online. This is because clients are nervous about getting their selection wrong. Here's why:

- Most buyers are time poor and risk averse, when they want to buy something they need it to work first time. They don't have time to fix things if it goes wrong. Also, in business, a wrong purchase can have a major impact on an organisation's performance and the buyer's internal reputation.
- Overwhelming choice – for most expertise and services there are multiple providers. Social proof helps clients to determine who comes with a proven track-record and is a safer bet.
- People are also wiser and resistant to marketing and sales approaches. In fact, Digital Intelligence found 92% of people trust recommendations from individuals (even if they don't know them) over brand messaging and advertising.

In buyers' research social proof gives reassurance. A visibly good reputation gives them security and this is why personal brands are becoming more appealing.



So is reputation and personal brand one and the same thing?

No, they're not, but you certainly need to have a good reputation as a foundation for building a personal brand and attracting clients as a result. And that good reputation is best built on three key foundation stones:

- **Credibility** – this comes from your skill, experience, knowledge, strengths. The 'what it is that you're good at'. A good reputation needs to have a 'what'
- **Authenticity** – your reputation has to reflect your true self. It will be easier to sustain if it is built on your natural strengths and is in alignment with your values.
- **Accountability** – it's going to be tough building a good reputation if you don't deliver as promised and are true to your word. If you aren't accountable it will be hard to get people to trust you.

Whereas reputation tends to focus on a singular aspect (for example, a client may say "he's a good negotiator" or "she saved me tax"), personal brands cover a broader spectrum. Think of a personal brand as more three dimensional –for example, "he is a champion of the financial challenges affecting my industry", "she is passionate about business growth issues facing female entrepreneurs".

A broader focus

Personal brands often blur work with other aspects, such as the wider interests or values, etc, of a person. People are drawn to those, as they bring greater

transparency and help them evaluate the professional beyond just one facet.

Those who stand out as iconic personal brands demonstrate a constant value-set, core message, strength, expertise or consistency of approach. In business, the best also sprinkle humility, calmness, passion, humanity or enthusiasm into their communications and approach. This greatly adds to their appeal.

Key lessons from personal branding strategies

Building a personal brand requires the same strategic approach as a business one and marketers in the professional services are well placed to guide fee-earners.

At the heart of the strategy is a central goal or objective of what it is the professional wants to be recognised as.

The personal brand is also clear about the target audience they want to attract. They will invest time getting to know that audience's preferences, nuances, challenges, needs, interests, etc. This understanding influences what the brand says, when they say it and how they say it. It ensures whatever is communicated remains engaging and truly resonates with that audience.

The understanding also guides a planned approach that makes the brand visible in the communication channels its target audience favours.

Finally, that plan often has a long-term focus and allows for ongoing refinement. This is because personal brands take time to build and the world continu-

ally evolves. Good personal branding strategies have patience and perseverance but also agility to adapt and capitalise on any relevant changes to its underpinning proposition and core message. They do however require a consistent approach and a dedicated commitment.

A common mistake

One mistake people often make about personal branding is that it isn't just about being highly visible on social media. Instead it's more about what your message and underpinning point of difference is, which is then shared via the channels your audience favours.

To successfully build a personal brand you need to resonate with your audience. Yes what a personal brand says and does is important, but so too is how they do and say it.

As an example, a person may be an expert on the latest retirement issues affecting the baby boomer generation, but if they can't articulate it in a way the audience understands they'll fail to gain resonance.

Similarly an expert who wasn't the first to market to reveal some research findings, but came later and explained the relevance of those findings in terms people understood would attract greater interest.

So when a personal brand is communicating with their audience they should always question 'will this resonate?'

Summary

In professional services a personal branding strategy can bring commercial benefits to both the individual and firm as a whole. It has helped some firms, sector and practice areas punch well above their weight and won them interest from a far wider audience.

The key to achieving this is to have a planned approach, which is focused both on the target audience the personal brand wants to attract and also that person's strengths, interests, long-held beliefs and values. It's worth reiterating that this isn't about being something you're not. Building a good reputation into a successful personal brand requires consistency and dedication.



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