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Changing perception through personal branding

How does personal branding work to affect, manipulate and manage reputation and perception? Here, we’ll examine case studies and examples to see how changing perception works using personal branding systems.

Imagine you are in need of an accountant for your investment firm. You want to hire someone with large-firm experience, who’s skilled at managing the financial details of multiple portfolio companies and complex ownership structures. You also want them to help you pay the least taxes possible without going to jail. You interview two final accountant prospects. The first one, Bob, grew his career in one of the Big Four accounting firms, has deep experience with complex tax structures and touts an Ivy League education. The second one, Jim, is also knowledgeable on tax structures for firms like yours, grew his career working with his father’s boutique firm, received his education from a state college before passing the CPA exam and comes highly recommended from your personal attorney. On paper, both candidates are technically qualified to handle your business accounting needs.

When you interview them, Bob talks about his qualifications, his schooling, his impressive client list and his notable track record. Jim, on the other hand, asks you questions about your business goals, why you started the firm, how you select companies to invest in, and what
you dream about. Both are qualified, but Jim feels like he cares about you and your business. You hire Jim because he feels like a partner, not a vendor.

Personal branding takes into account that all things considered equal—both are qualified—you will choose to work with someone you feel a connection with, a synergy. Or, if you don’t feel a compelling reason to choose one, you may simply choose one in order to not choose the other. If Bob comes off as arrogant and stubborn, you might choose Jim simply to avoid working with Bob.

Widespread belief among marketing practitioners promotes that we act on logic (I need an accountant) but we buy on emotion (Jim gets me!). Here, we will take a deeper look at how personal branding works, why it’s critical in twenty-first-century business, entrepreneurship and thought leadership, and what happens when a strong, consistent and compelling personal brand is missing.

Personal branding explained

In 1997, Tom Peters authored an article for Fast Company that changed the way we saw ourselves and our careers. In the piece, Peters proclaimed:

Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding. We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You.¹

Peters was describing a new career ecosystem, an intricate web of intentional and strategic tools we can develop for ourselves that gives us positioning, recognition, refer-ability and credibility. Instead of leaving our fate (and reputation) up to those people around us, we were now encouraged to be proactive and take control over how we are perceived. The concept of personal branding was, by most accounts, born. Personal branding today involves the use of digital platforms and tools to help us position and promote ourselves. When
Peters emphasized personal branding, he focused on several of the same systems, and his teachings gave us enough of a base to add social media, social networking and online reputation management opportunities (and challenges) to the mix.

Personal branding is the way you position yourself: the web of interlaced impressions that drive an intentional perception with your target audience. Personal branding, when done correctly, offers you an organizing set of principles through which to make all decisions—how you’ll show up, form relationships, carry yourself and build an intentional legacy. Personal branding is about perception, identity and ultimately legacy: Who are you, what do you care about, and how do you want others to feel about you? Judith Glaser, mentioned previously, offers this explanation:

Three main constituents of identity are how you view yourself, how others view you, and how you judge/act based on others’ perceptions of you. Whether or not the perspectives are those of your immediate friends, family, or the social norms of your culture, they significantly shape your sense of identity.²

Our sense of identity—who we are, what we value, what we offer—directly influences and drives our personal brand strategy and anchors in values and goals. Through the process of building a brand, you uncover marketable assets, character traits and qualities, as well as the blind spots you need to correct. It is a process of self-discovery and goal-setting, focused on specific audiences and objectives.

Who needs to worry about building a brand?

Once, during the questions and answers portion of a large lecture I delivered, a participant in the back of the room asked, “If I want to continue working as a doctor, I don’t need to focus on this branding stuff, right?” His theory was that if a patient needs a doctor, they hire a doctor. In other words, as a doctor, he didn’t need to concern himself with positioning himself. Was he right? His belief was that his patients needed to engage with him, therefore positioning really was
irrelevant: As long as he could perform the medical procedures patients needed, he was set. My response to him was, “If you interact with other people, you need to build and maintain a strong personal brand. I guess the only job where it wouldn’t matter might be if you work as a hitman.”

College students, financial executives, doctors, authors, business leaders, entrepreneurs, cartoonists, project managers, physicists, beauty pageant contestants, real estate developers, tech giants, professional athletes, software developers, scientists, researchers, teachers, non-profit leaders, social justice advocates, venture capitalists: I’ve worked with them all. Each one approached the personal branding and reputation management process with a similar question, “Does someone like me need to be concerned with what other people think about me?” Yes.

I’ve worked with young adults who’ve been entrepreneurs since they could remember but feared investors wouldn’t take them seriously. I’ve worked with senior executives who worried that their life was coming to a close and they didn’t have much time left to leave the legacy they desired. I’ve coached mothers returning to the workforce after an absence of many years, and professional athletes who feared they couldn’t find a purpose after sports. For each of them, and perhaps for you, the idea of taking control over the way they are perceived is both intriguing and terrifying at the same time.

I remember working with Mary, a leader in the field of addiction recovery who’d authored several books, led workshops of thousands of people and called the first-class section of American Airlines “home.” Mary had built a huge following of recovering addicts, families living with addiction, therapists and medical practitioners who hung onto her methodology, research and approach to care for struggling patients. When I first met Mary, one of her first comments to me was:

I’m 70 years young. I know there isn’t as much runway in front of me as behind, but I want to be sure my legacy accurately reflects who I am and why I cared about my work. Not just the impact or process of my work.
Mary wanted to be in control over how her story was told, even after she was no longer involved in telling it. This is a common concern for many professionals, regardless of their age or experience.

If you work in a field where you don’t want to be found or are the only person in the entire universe who does a particular service or has a specific skill that no one else has, then maybe you can disregard the way people feel about you and how you’re perceived. For the rest of us, we know we are competing with others who are equally talented, qualified and experienced who offer similar work, product, service and expertise. Our ability to stand apart, differentiate our value and create an experience with our target audience is critical in the twenty-first-century global economy.

What happens without a personal brand strategy?

Most professionals don’t think about their personal brand as they spring from college, university or graduate school into their careers. They focus on gathering career experience, building networks of valuable contacts, accumulating knowledge and skills to make them more valuable to the next employer/client/investor. These professionals likely were encouraged by parents, business school professors and career advisors to stay open and neutral to opportunities so as not to “close any doors” that could limit us later. Good advice, sort of. At the same time, we are being reassured by our parents, coaches, mentors and advisors that “it doesn’t matter what other people think about you. It just matters what you believe about yourself—what’s in your heart.” And they are half-right. Now, we know that it does matter what other people think about us because how they perceive us directly impacts and influences whether they want to offer us opportunities, advance us in our careers, and refer us to others. So, while it does matter what’s in your heart... it also matters how other people perceive us.
When the marketplace defines you

Without a strategic and intentional personal brand strategy, the market defines you. Competition for opportunities becomes fierce, and your relevance and reputation can be misunderstood, overlooked or negative. This is the case for many professionals today who find themselves passed up or dismissed for key opportunities. Many factors impact how the market will define you. Which market are you competing in? If you care mostly about how your peers, colleagues, staff and executive team perceive you, that may be your “market.” If you are more focused on public perception, media attention and customer input, the aperture of your defined market opens more widely.

Regardless of who you determine is your market, recognize that they will form a perception of you, either on their own or with your input and direction. As we saw in Chapter 1, perception is highly influenced by the emotional, cultural and environmental filters someone brings into their understanding, but as the title of this book notes, you can “control the narrative” and drive perception. In most cases, the reason the market defines someone is simply because no focus, attention or effort was put towards managing and directing their perception. Simply assuming that people will “get” you, find you valuable and compelling and want to hire you is naïve. There is so much information made available through the internet and social media that if you aren’t driving the narrative, you are giving up authorship of your own story.

Risks of letting the market define you

When you leave to chance that others will find you relevant, compelling, interesting and valuable, you give away a lot of your power and control. Aside from emotional filters and biases, your target audience could compare you to others who are less qualified or be misinformed about who you are and what you stand for. For example, when I began working in reputation management and personal branding, few people understood the term “personal branding.” Even my executive
clients would call what I did “executive coaching,” “impression management” or “image consulting” because they were unclear about what it meant to build a personal brand. In managing and directing my own brand, I needed to clearly, confidently and consistently promote my skills under the heading of personal branding, and I was burdened with defining what it meant, which problems I solve, and why potential clients need to hire me. And, I needed to differentiate myself from others who might eventually use the same term (“personal branding”) but mean a different service and experience. Over time, the values I stood for, the brand I built and the understanding of what I do, became clearer and I found the narrative more easily controlled.

When we leave our reputation up to the imagination of others, we forfeit the opportunity to explain how we are uniquely valuable to them. We risk being seen as generic or being grouped with others who’ve chartered unique (and very different) brands from us.

Consider the following examples:

- Fred, a financial planner, is often asked, “Oh, so you’re like a Suze Orman!”
- Jennifer, who’s passionate about international travel and adventure, is told, “I know what you do—I’ve got a cousin who likes to escape real life, too.”
- Chris, an Army veteran, is asked, “So, you have anger issues? I mean, isn’t that why people join the military?”

*The market can define you positively, though

Even if you have let the market define you and have not been strategic about shaping others’ perception of you, it doesn’t mean the public perception of you will automatically be negative. When Greg, a leading executive in the employee benefits field, hired me, he was looking to understand why he was so popular with his clients. He said:

I have a great client base of wonderful, long-term accounts. My clients tell me how much they value my services; they are loyal and refer other
companies to work with me often. The challenge is that I don’t know what I did to earn such praise and loyalty.

He continued, “I want to retire in ten years. My fear is that if I’m not clear on what I did to get here, I might mess it up and lose the credibility, reputation and business I’ve earned.” In his case, nothing was wrong—Greg just wanted to understand what levers were available to him so he could ensure a similar track record for the remainder of his career.

In working with Greg, we spent a lot of time in the assessment phase, doing an inventory of his brand. We assessed his values, goals, behavior and communications styles. We looked back over wins and losses, opportunities and challenges, and how he’d navigated them. Then, we examined his client relationships. After conducting email and phone interviews with his long-term clients, we were able to identify key patterns:

- Greg’s clients never felt “sold to.” They truly believed that when Greg offered a new product or service, or their premiums changed, that it was in the client’s best interest to do so. Greg had established tremendous credibility with his clients through his consistent transparency of communication—several clients even spoke of times Greg showed them how to push back on a rate increase to get more favorable terms, or when he explained that a fancy new product would not serve the client long term.
- Greg was highly trusted by his clients. They described him as part of their company’s family. This was a behavior Greg never realized he was exhibiting, but when we discussed it, he thoroughly agreed with them—“I’ve been to their kids’ weddings and baptisms,” he proudly proclaimed! “In some cases, our wives even get together to socialize.”
- His humor and playfulness were seen as refreshing. A few of Greg’s clients offered feedback on their service provider prior to Greg: “Business had always been so serious. When we met Greg, it was still a serious business, but he made it fun. He helped us enjoy the process.”
Finally, the most notable feedback on Greg’s brand came from a client who described him this way: “I feel like Greg lives and breathes employee benefits. I truly believe he thinks about our company’s needs as he’s drifting off to sleep at night. That makes me feel very safe working with Greg. He makes us feel safe.”

Words that emerged from this research into Greg’s work style and personal brand included: transparent, trust, credibility, social/personable/approachable, fun and safe. To Greg, this aligned perfectly with how he wanted to be known. Having clear and explicit examples of how his desired reputation was showing up for his clients on a daily basis empowered us to create a thoughtful and intentional strategy to make sure Greg continued to do what he was doing, which was clearly working for him!

The plan I built and coached Greg towards included several strategies to capitalize on the keywords that he wanted to pursue, and which his existing clients already said mattered to them (and earned their loyalty). Going forward, Greg was more mindful of using the specific words that would resonate with his clients and attract new clients and felt more in control of how the remaining ten years of his career would play out.

Brands are driven by feelings

A personal brand is that quality that you assign words to, and you just feel about someone... that je ne sais quoi that makes one person more interesting, relevant, valuable and worth pursuing. It’s sometimes hard to pinpoint where it starts, but you just know when it’s there and you may even question how your feelings towards that person developed. Does that mean personal branding is about altering or affecting perception? Yes.

Brands make us feel something—they make us feel confident, powerful, safe or proud. Or brands can make us feel unworthy, inadequate, fearful or shamed. In product branding, the focus is always on the expectation of the experience the target consumer will have of
that product: What do we want them to feel when they hold our razor? What beliefs will they have about their life if they buy this computer? How will that customer feel about themselves when they drive away in our car? To illustrate, imagine if I were to go test drive a high-end luxury sports car. I have certain beliefs around what that experience would be like. I believe I’ll get behind the steering wheel of the beautifully crafted automobile, sink comfortably into the finely engineered leather seats and when the engine turns over and begins to roar... I’ll feel invincible, confident, sexy and successful. I expect that when I drive down the street in this fancy car, people will look at me and wonder, “Who is that beautiful, successful and powerful woman (who can afford such a special car)?” They will watch (with envy) as I speed past them in this amazing machine. This is my perception of the expectation of the experience I’d have driving this car. And, if that experience is valuable and attractive enough to me, I will find a way to afford such a luxury to have that feeling more often.

Because brands are based on feelings and expectations (beliefs and perception), much of the conversation around personal brand-building and repair focuses on emotion. While there are many behaviors and feelings that drive buying behavior, it is that long-held belief by marketing practitioners that buyers act on logic (I need a new car) and buy on emotion (THIS car makes me feel confident, influential, accomplished). Brand attributes in product marketing are critical to sales success. Even outside of product marketing, we know that feelings are critical to effecting change and influencing others. Feelings drive the power we have to control the narrative and in personal branding they are the foundation for the experience we’ll have for the people we want to attract to us.

How a personal brand impacts how you’re perceived

If you were being introduced to a potential board member, and another board member warns you that this candidate was known for being ruthless, aggressive and indiscreet, how do you think that first meeting would go? You’d likely meet them with skepticism and would be reluctant to share confidential company information for
fear they’d share it. Similarly, if you knew nothing about this potential board member, but you researched them online and saw photos of them partying with young girls in tropical settings, would you think they exercised poor judgment?

Reputation built on word of mouth and online information only tells part of the story. It is limited to the viewpoint of the person sharing the insight (in this case, your current board member) or specific information channels online. While we know this is not a complete picture of who the person is, what they stand for and how they can add value, we begin to form perception about them without even realizing it. One of the hardest skills I had to learn in working with clients was to not form perception about a client prior to working with them. Yes, I have to interview them, and they interview me. We evaluate each other and whether we’re a fit to accomplish specific goals. I conduct online research to uncover hidden traps in their reputation I might encounter as I advise them. But my job is to keep an open mind as I help them navigate their reputational challenges and opportunities.

It might seem simple: Just refrain from forming an opinion or judgment. But, as we saw in Chapter 1, judgment, beliefs and perception are habitual. “Keeping an open mind” is sometimes easier said than done. One technique I use to manage my own perception of prospective clients and their situations is to remember to focus on what is most consistent, not what is unusual. Personal branding is all about consistency—when more often I see you acting or speaking or behaving a certain way, I’ll believe it. Every once in a while, we all make mistakes, fall off script and deviate from our brand path. Those should be seen as the exceptions. We can trust that which is most consistent with what we expect and believe to be true about the person when there is enough consistent evidence to show who they truly are.

Perception can work against you

In working with a new client, I’ll often examine multiple sites to see what I can learn about them. Instead of just reading the leading news
headlines, I’ll look for any assets the client manages for themselves, such as social media channels. I’ll read their recommendations on LinkedIn, peruse their Facebook profile, read what former employees say about them on Glassdoor and so on. While it’s tempting to believe the headlines are all true, often there is more to the story.

Still refraining from forming judgment (as best I can), I’ll assess how the person is positioned, positively or negatively, and what actions they might have done to manage or influence that perception. If the information online is all negative, for instance, and the individual has no proactive counter-positioning efforts anywhere, that tells one story. If they’ve lashed out in the comments section of news articles, posted blogs and videos professing their innocence, that tells another story. Often, when negative information appears about someone online, other online users jump into the mix. Trolls, angry former employees, disgruntled workers, irritated journalists and general naysayers may offer up their views and opinions using the anonymous cloak of the internet. Similarly, employees, peers and other advocates could rally to support the individual and that’s also worth noting.

Perception, over time, does start to feel real. For the client who’s tried to show who they are and failed to build rapport with their target audience, it can be extremely frustrating. Online readers can begin to believe what they read and feel that if there was another story to be told, surely the individual would have done so. If only it were that easy.

Perception can work in your favor

The positive side of personal branding is that the transfer of credibility, trust and perception can also work to serve you. When people believe positive traits, qualities and values assigned to you, they will tell others. If those qualities are consistent with what you desire, and you act reliably with how they believe you to be, your ability to be referred and endorsed grows exponentially! For most of us, referrals and word-of-mouth marketing is the most cost-effective way to expand our business, influence and reach. Online and in person,
when someone else touts our value and others take notice, our business significance and importance rise. For years, professionals and other online users held onto the score they received through a now-defunct website and their unique algorithm called “klout.” This “score” claimed to indicate someone’s level of relevance. Even today, clout (defined as influence or power, for instance in politics or business) is still used to refer to someone’s importance, recognition and brand influence.

Brand influence matters because if you’re unknown or unrecognized for your ability to contribute, you risk being passed up. When we say we care about reach and authority, we mean we care that we are seen as compelling and relevant by the audience we seek to influence, inspire and impact. When we are seen positively, recognized for our contribution and offer, and are highly referred and endorsed, the threshold for consideration by others is lowered. Ideal prospects and opportunities flood toward us as if by magic. We are attracting exactly what we seek, and the effort seems almost minimal. But it’s not. Personal branding sets the stage for this magic. By crafting and deploying a strategic brand program, living authentically and consistently through personal values, and earning the trust and credibility of a target audience, you reap the rewards of success. Branding is the hard part; living that brand is often much easier.

Perception can reveal opportunity

Being able to inventory and evaluate the perception that exists in the market about you can reveal tremendous opportunity and insight. Here’s an example of how this works: When I launched my company in 2008, I’d left a long-standing career in corporate branding and marketing, having worked for some remarkable and impactful global brands across many industries. As I launched LIDA360 in 2008, I knew I needed to inventory my own reputation so I could evaluate the assets (or detractors) I was working with and which I’d need to build off of or repair. What I discovered surprised and humbled me. Up to that point I’d spent my career focused on getting to whatever was next: driving, growing, accelerating growth at all turns. While I
enjoyed many years of personal and professional “success,” I’d held my foot firmly on the gas pedal of my career, projects, teams and the groups I led. To say I was always moving fast would be an understatement. This was reflected in the feedback I gathered about my own brand and reputation as I set out to build my company.

In 2008, I would have described myself as “determined, competitive, and focused on excellence,” yet I received candid feedback from trusted advisors who offered up words like “cutthroat”, “aggressive” and “non-collaborative.” Oops! This was not the brand I wanted to portray in my next venture. After swallowing hard and taking a pause, I realized the opportunity to learn from this perception feedback. While it certainly stung to hear these insights, I quickly saw that I’d received valuable insight into my blind spots. Had I not received this input I would have possibly pursued opportunities with a style that was off-putting and could have hurt relationships I valued. Instead, I learned where I could pivot, how I could capitalize on my strengths and where I could work through my weaknesses. In personal branding, the goal is consistency and not perfection, remember, but I needed to make significant adjustments to my attitude, behavior, interactions and communication so that my truest value came forward and wasn’t overshadowed by my demeanor or delivery.

We’ll discuss the concept of feedback, pivoting and modifying your behavior to get results throughout this book, as they are key aspects to building a sustainable and scalable personal brand. Without the ability to flex and adjust, we run the risk of becoming obsolete or getting too deeply rooted in a system or reputation such that we can’t grow, personally and professionally. Perception, while very personal, can give us the insight we need to adjust in meaningful and authentic ways.

**Trust and credibility drive brands**

Another theme you’ll hear throughout this book is the importance of trust and credibility. For most of my work, I avoid industries where trust is not manageable, or could be constructed in artificial ways. We know that it’s possible to put “spin” on a story, or to photoshop an
image to create a false impression. Those tactics, while still prevalent in some industries and professions, are not authentic or sustainable. Instead, when executives, entrepreneurs, leaders and professionals strive for trust and credibility, they find more opportunity to be genuine in their relationships, candid in their expression of their values and they attract likeminded individuals. The opportunities they also attract feel more consistent and “on brand” and career acceleration seems easier.

Personal branding is all about trust. Your brand will be grounded in a common and clearly articulated set of values and passions which others can rely upon, and for which you can be trusted to live and act. When someone has established a strong and consistent brand, and we see them suddenly act “out of character,” we attribute it to an off day and not a fracture in brand. If there is no clearly established credibility and trust in place, every misstep or misbehavior is attributed to who we believe that person is and not to a mistake. Just as Edelman looks at trust with global business brands, we can assess and test our trustability and credibility with the audiences we seek to build relationship with. One easy way to see this is by actually asking—do you trust me? Do you trust that I’ll represent you and your goals? Do you believe me when I tell you I’m passionate about solving this problem? Do you see me as a credible resource for…?

Values and actions drive beliefs

Similarly, our values and actions reinforce perception by driving others to see—and believe—who we are and what we hold dear. People are looking for evidence of your values, and consistency in your actions to live them. If you tell me you’re passionate about social justice causes, yet I see no evidence of this (online or in your actions), I’ll question it. Often, someone will profess allegiance to a cause or concern, yet there is nothing in their history or current behavior that supports their commitment. They simply want to join the bandwagon of a trending initiative or idea. This is also where brands can fracture.
We seek proof and evidence through actions, but most target audiences aren’t expecting heroic or extreme displays of this commitment. If you say you stand behind your employees’ actions, we expect to see you back them up when there’s a problem. If you pledge to return exponential value to shareholders, we assume you’ll make fiscally sound decisions which support their investment in you and the business. In many cases, I’d advise a client to not issue a public proclamation unless they thoroughly understand how the narrative plays out: Are you truly willing and ready to pivot what might need to change so you can back up this assertion? How long can you stay committed to this direction?

Early on, an environmental entrepreneur client of mine was given a prime opportunity to present at a major conference of other entrepreneurs, media and investors. He knew the event had a more “conservative” slant to it, and the investors attending came from more traditional investment banking careers and institutions. This particular client was all about pushing boundaries, independent thinking, innovation and disruption. He’d have to now cater to an audience that valued a more traditional approach for their portfolio companies. In discussing the opportunity with him, we evaluated the short-term and long-term benefits of the opportunity. For example, at such an event he could certainly attract new investors, but would he want these investors? What would that experience be like for him and the company? He would certainly attract new entrepreneur friends, colleagues and possible strategic partnerships. But would they see him the same way once he was back home, in his office, working in his natural disruptor nature? We evaluated whether he’d be able to successfully communicate his vision—and the vision of his company, authentically and with the same vigor and intensity he would if he was in a room of likeminded individuals, similarly passionate about solving the same issues, in a similar way. Or, would catering to this audience cause him to appear disingenuous or even dishonest?

Finally, we discussed the long-term brand implications to him and his business if either path proved true: he was able to build relationship with audiences he didn’t like or feel authentic around, or if later
they saw him as dishonest? The event wasn’t a make-or-break business opportunity, but it was an interesting exercise to run through how he could show up and what the implications and perception could be that would reflect back on him and his business.

In evaluating opportunities, remember that your values play an important role in not only your personal brand development, but also how you deploy and live that brand. When your actions align with your values, you build credibility and people can trust you. Without action, values are hollow, they appear to be “lip service.” Without values tied to them, your actions can be misinterpreted and misunderstood by your audiences.

Corporate versus personal brands: Don’t confuse them

Today, many professionals find the line between their personal and company brands blurred. The CEO of a popular company is often noted as the “face of the brand,” even unwittingly. Team members for a brand might find their personal values and beliefs spilling into public forums online, confusing customers if their view conflicts with the company brand. As more and more people post on social media, engage in public discourse and form external relationships, they are also becoming the brand of the company.

Years ago, I worked with a young and brilliant CEO of a technology startup. This company was on the verge of tremendous success, gaining the attention of many investment suitors, channel partners, media and others as their technology solved an important global problem. The immediate issue, however, was that the CEO’s personal brand didn’t align with the company positioning. The CEO, Hector, had grown up in the tech world as a classic tech startup story: He developed unique and innovative systems in his garage, got his start as an early employee of some (now) tech giants, and could quickly scare anyone not techie with his theories around cyber threats and data mining leaks. It was Hector’s track record, knowledge and his over-the-top boisterous personality that often gained him notice. A conversation with Hector was always exciting and terrifying all at
the same time. He delivered stories and theories as Academy Award-worthy performances!

Hector’s personality was “large and in charge,” as he liked to profess. He commanded the room with his deep voice and outlandish style. Never one to dress “corporate” or follow professional protocols, he relished his style as an outlier: a technology superstar with a larger-than-life personality. While his employees, friends, professional colleagues and followers loved his eccentric style, his investors didn’t. They tolerated his personality to a point. When it came time to pursue additional rounds of funding and participate in important road shows with potential investors, the feedback cited concerns about his executive presence, his ability to stay focused on growing the business, and his capacity to maintain relationships with key accounts over time without losing interest. If we didn’t redirect Hector’s positioning, and posture the company brand as unique from him, the risk was high that they wouldn’t eventually get to IPO stage or even sale.

For several months we worked on developing Hector’s brand online and in person. We started with adjusting his image and key strategic relationships. He went on a personal brand tour visiting clients, investors, and important channel partners within key sectors. He polished his style a bit, toned down his flair for the dramatic, and tailored his approach to each conversation. He was not changing who he was or being disingenuous. Rather, he amended and modified his style to be appropriate to the situation. For an investor meeting, he was well briefed on financial forecasts, pricing models and growth forecasts for the company. For meetings with influencers and referral sources, he paid more attention to helping them see the benefit of working with him to their own business and customer base. He became skilled at speaking to the needs of the people he was serving.

Later, when the time came for him to sell the company, he’d successfully separated his unique personality from the company and it was easier for acquirers to see how they could buy the company, incorporate the technology into their own portfolio, and Hector could remain involved as an asset. Taking the spotlight off himself allowed Hector to create a viable company for acquisition and growth.
Here’s another example of how this works: I was referred to Martin by a member of his board of directors. They were beginning his transition from CEO into retirement, and the board was concerned that Martin’s name (and reputation) was so closely intertwined with the company that separating the two could be problematic upon his departure. Martin had founded the early childhood education company 25 years prior and was ready to do something new. He’d become a well-recognized speaker, author—with 14 books to his credit—and lecturer on unique approaches to personalized learning for children. His work garnered him regular media attention and he was seen as an expert in his field, an expert who is the CEO of a growing company with which his name is synonymous.

Martin wasn’t planning to slow down and play golf in retirement. He wanted to continue writing and speaking on similar topics to what he’d done before, but he needed to separate from the legacy brand he’d built through his company. How could we disconnect his name from the company so he could do something else, and the company could continue to thrive in his absence (he would remain as a board member but have a limited role after retirement)? Our strategy began with the transition narrative: Why was Martin leaving the company as CEO, where was he headed, why was the change timely and important to the company’s trajectory? With a media tour and targeted customer promotions, we controlled the story around the change and stopped any speculation about his departure before it started. We brought the new CEO into the conversation, as well, to showcase continuity of passion and experience.

The board and new CEO played an active role in this announcement rollout. They were interviewed alongside Martin, starred in a transition video we created to run at major events, on social media and the website, and the new CEO slowly began to field inquiries and take the more prominent role as the face of the organization. While this approach might seem routine for a high-profile C-level transition, in Martin’s case, his visibility tied to the company was extraordinary. We needed to show that the institutional knowledge he’d baked into the fibers of the company would still be there, even if he was gone from day-to-day operations. This part was tricky. As we
continued the migration over to the new CEO, there remained times when journalists or investors still insisted on speaking instead to Martin about developments. The 18 months prior to his exit were spent navigating (with finesse) these conversations.

But Martin was still concerned about his own personal brand and reputation after he departed. Would he be viable and interesting to his community once his title changed? For his own branding and reputation needs, we decided he would take a short sabbatical prior to officially exiting as CEO. This was an untraditional move, given the company was in the midst of a leadership transition. We used the three months of his sabbatical to set Martin up for new positioning—he registered a new LLC under his own name, authored several “letters to the editor” and articles for leading journals and publications, talked about his vision for his future and contribution to the field, and held many strategic networking lunches and dinners with key influencers who were now meeting Martin, the consultant, instead of Martin, the CEO of his legacy company.

In the end, the transition was smooth, and Martin was able to swiftly move from CEO to transitioning CEO to sabbatical to consultant/business owner, with his own brand. The company was poised to thrive and continue its mission to serve the greater mission of helping children learn.

In closing

Who needs personal branding? We all do. Wherever you are in life, whatever station you’re in as you read this, your personal brand is how you communicate your value to the audiences who must find and understand you. Without a strong and intentional brand, you risk being misunderstood, overlooked or deemed irrelevant. With a personal brand, you are leveraging the power of influence and narrative to direct your audience towards the perception you seek them to have of you.
Personal branding is not about “spin” or reinvention or distracting your target audience such that they see something inauthentic as real. Personal branding is rooted in trust and credibility and must be led through your values and passions. Then, when you tell yourself you’re worthy and why you’re valuable, and others begin to appreciate and refer you for that value, opportunities appear!

Endnotes
