Build Your Professional Brand for Career Success

By Kim Dority

What’s a professional brand? In the marketing world, a brand is the collective characteristics that the market attributes to a given product or service.

Think about these companies and products: Target, Estée Lauder, and Haägen Daz. You probably associate very specific ideas with each of those brands. For Target, you might think “inexpensive but good quality, family-friendly, a shopping experience that’s fun and upbeat.” For Estée Lauder, perhaps beauty, glamour, a high-quality and expensive luxury. And for Haägen Daz, you may be thinking chocolate, indulgence, high quality, an affordable luxury... okay, and also a gazillion calories, but who cares??!!

Professional Brands... for People

Okay, so those are brands for products. Now think of these people: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, actress and singer Jennifer Lopez, anti-apartheid activist and former president of South Africa Nelson Mandela, songwriter and singer Lady Gaga, and media entrepreneur Oprah Winfrey.

Each of these people has a very specific brand. That is, they are known to the world for very specific values, passions, skills, and professional competencies. When you thought of them, you probably also had a set of expectations regarding how they might (or do) behave in their various roles and circumstances.

So it is with your own professional brand. A professional brand isn’t about creating a phony “persona” or pretending to be someone you’re not. Instead, it’s about showcasing the best of who you are and the value you provide. Your professional brand highlights the strengths that you want to be known for, and takes the initiative to shape others’ assumptions about your ability to contribute.

What Are the Key Characteristics of a Brand?

There are many different definitions of what constitutes a professional brand, but one way to think about brand characteristics is laid out by authors David McNally and Karl D. Speak in Be Your Own Brand (Berrett-Koehler, 2002). They identified the big three characteristics as competencies, standards, and style.

- **Competencies.** Not only what you’re good at, but what you want to be known for being good at. What work are you passionate about doing? (If you’re a decent manager, but you hate managing people, you don’t want to build your brand around management competencies.)
- **Standards.** How do you perform your competencies? Are you known for always beating deadlines, bringing creative thinking to a project, paying attention to all the details, or ensuring the smooth running of team projects? Are you a perfectionist? What level of performance should others expect of you?
- **Style.** How do you communicate and interact with others? Think about your relations with classmates, co-workers, bosses, customers, etc. Are you generally more casual in your interactions or more formal? A high-visibility contributor or a more reflective, quiet participant?
Do you gravitate toward leadership roles, or prefer to be more of a team player? Are you someone who uses humor (when appropriate) to lighten the mood? These are the attributes you would showcase as part of your professional brand.

**How Do You Demonstrate Your Professional Brand?**

There are a number of ways you demonstrate your value to the world (and potential employers); most important among these are:

- **Your language** – is it hesitant or confident, cold or friendly, arrogant or supportive, careless or professional?
- **Your clothes** – do they reinforce the way you want a potential employer, co-worker, customer, or client to think of you? Or do they tell them not to take you seriously as a professional?
- **Your contributions** – what projects or volunteer work have you done that demonstrate the professional characteristics you want to be known for? (These characteristics could be a commitment to community service, innovative thinking, leadership, artistic ability, etc.)
- **Your public communications** – on the job or in class, in print, and online.
- **Your attitude** – are you a positive person? Easy to work with? Comfortable working as part of a team?

**What If You’re Just Starting Out in Your Career?**

Even if you’re just starting out in your career, as a student you’ll have many opportunities to start building your professional brand. What do you want that brand to say about you? Well, for starters, you might want to focus on developing a reputation for being:

- Easy to work with
- A strong and reliable team participant, whether as a leader or team member (think group projects!)
- Someone whose judgment can be trusted
- Reliable
- Confident in your own skills and knowledge, respectful of others’

If you develop a brand based on – or reputation for – these characteristics while you’re in school, you’ll find your co-workers, classmates, and teachers will be much likelier to want to help you move your career forward. (It’s always easier to recommend someone who you know is going to be a great employee.)

**What About Building Your Brand Online?**

You have all sorts to ways to boost – or bury – your professional brand online. The social networking sites – for example, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter – are a great way to promote your interests and expertise, or discuss what you’re learning about in school. Or consider writing a blog on a professional topic that interests you or creating a website that provides resources on a topic for which you’d like to be known.

Just keep in mind that you should assume *all* of your online communications will be visible to – and checked out by – a potential employer. You don’t have to be boring, just try not to do any major damage to your professional reputation!

**Why Your Professional Brand is Really Important to Your Career**

Having a strong professional brand can help you build the career you want in a number of ways:

- **It provides stability in the midst of workplace and economic chaos.** You know the drill: pink slips are flying left and right, companies are changing direction (and staffing needs), entire industries are contracting (and job opportunities along with them.) You may have made a decision that your current job (or employer) is a dead-end deal, and that it’s time to head in a new direction.
Having a strong professional brand lays the groundwork for you to land on your feet with a new employer if needed, because you’ve already built a reputation (which they can see online and/or hear about from others) that lets them know how valuable you are.

- **It helps shape how people are willing to let you contribute.** If you’re new on the job, and no one really knows you, they won’t know what to expect of you. Should they trust your judgment? Should they give you the important assignments or new opportunities? If you’ve built a track record – a brand – that lets them know you’re smart, capable, and have high professional standards, you’ve gone a long way toward answering those questions for them.

- **It positions you in the path of opportunity.** If you’ve done a good job of building a reputation as a strong contributor, you’re more likely to be mentioned by others when new opportunities arise.

  It’s impossible to tell where a new project may be developing, when a company may be taking a new direction that would be a perfect fit for your skills, or how a start-up is going to need your expertise to take advantage of an expanding market segment. But if you’ve got a great brand that’s visible to a lot of people, it’s a lot likelier that your name will cross paths with those opportunities through people who can connect the dots for you.