

PETER HORN



PERSONAL  
BRANDING

# Personal Branding

How to create your own brand

PETER HORN

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*Personal Branding, Executive Magazine Books, 250 pages, hard cover, GBP £ 30 or US \$ 50. Will be delivered from June/July 2009.*

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## Why personal branding?

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Persons who are able to establish themselves as a personal brand within or outside their organization create a conduit that will carry them and their skills as far as their ambitions can reach. This chapter introduces personal branding past and present, presents case studies for the reader to emulate, and illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of greater exposure.

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*“And now its time to say goodbye, for me to die and you to live.”*

So Socrates (469 – 399 B.C.) ended his speech to the Athenians after being sentenced to death. According to Plato, Socrates gave his judges a fate worse than death after his execution: the battle with their own conscience.

You might ask what this has to do with personal branding – the ability to project one’s personality and abilities to others in a strategic context.

The answer is: in contrast to the judges who took his life, Socrates – by coincidence or thoughtfulness - became a good example of a long-term strategy because his ideas and words still live on 2500 years after his death.

Plato spread Socrates’ messages e.g. through the academy he founded close to Athens in 387 B.C. where he educated young people in Philosophy – an institution that existed for 900 years. It was closed by the Christian Roman emperor Justinian who claimed that the academy was a breeding ground for heathens.

### **The invisible threshold**

Personal branding is connected to conscience and long-term strategic planning because you cannot make yourself personally visible towards others without - possessing something that hints at, promises, and actually delivers something of value to them. In a popular quote – by American president Abraham Lincoln - “You may fool all the people some of the time, you can even fool some of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all the time.”

Therefore you have to make up your mind if you want to be exposed at all. If you decide to cross this invisible threshold between being unknown and famous, there are many ways back – the veil of forgetfulness has shrouded quite a few through time. For those

who want to progress then the deal is to win followers and secure distribution channels for their message.

Many lessons in personal branding can be learned from one of the most famous persons in world history, and we are not talking here about members of the Beatles. Whether Jesus of Nazareth intended it or not, he became a mighty, almighty powerful brand. The personal branding expert to thank here, again, possibly unintentionally, was St. Paul, who adjusted details of Jesus' teachings so that they would be accepted by, and be acceptable to, his 'target audience' and their culture.

The writing of the four gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John allowed a much more consistent, rapid dissemination of the message of Jesus as the newborn church saw it. That these stories were written many decades after Christ's ascension, and contained significantly differing accounts of the facts did not seem to hurt the cause.

A few centuries later, the failing Roman Empire decided "if you can't beat them, join them" and took their turn in re-branding Jesus and his message, creating excellent business opening new branches of the exponentially growing Church to the outer dominions of the empire. Christendom kept up Paul's excellent strategy of adapting its message to suit the local population. The winter solstice was re-branded as Christ's birthday celebration. Easter festivities were taken off the Saxon Goddess Eostre, and given to Jesus whose message of forgiveness did after all offer new life. The story of his rising from the dead did not seem so outlandish at that time of year, since the lifeless frozen land beneath the peasants' feet was doing the same, coming to life with the spring.

With Brand Jesus so well entrenched, the powers that be found almost limitless opportunities to capitalise on the good name, and with tithing, the selling of indulgences, and in modern times, church tax, it became a lucrative name.

Intervening in all of life's momentous events, births, weddings, funerals, not to mention the weekly day of rest, the priest had excellent advertising slots to keep the brand vigorously promoted.

### **Professional Fame**

Most people do not become famous overnight. It takes hard work - often done by professional PR advisors - for people such as singers, musicians, sport stars and actors.

Metallica, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Harrison Ford, The Rolling Stones, Paris Hilton, Madonna, and David Beckham. These names have one thing in common: their PR advisors try to keep them away from the press until they have a current commercial project, like a new CD, a film, a concert, a game, or a play.

Then they use all they have got, and if they cannot get enough coverage with a local press meeting, the PR advisers from time to time tempt the journalists with exclusive interviews that include a trip to a more enticing part of the globe.

This is why some newspapers, radio and television send journalists 1500 miles to do an exclusive story, even though the interviews could just as well have taken place just around the corner.

So if there is a lack of interest, it is always a good idea to give the ladies and gentlemen of the press an engaging experience, which also enhances their personal branding towards colleagues, friends and family, and the ultimate audience of the interview.

In Hollywood, things are often angled in another way. Jeannie Mortensen, who ran her own television production company for quite a few years in the City of Angles, tells of her experiences of how big stars such as Mel Gibson, Denzel Washington, and Bill Murray promote their newly-released films.

Interviews were given one after the other, as on a production line, all honed to be short, sharp and adapted to the target audience

For an English audience, they may say something about football, or complain about Transport for London (TfL), and the price of a beer. The trick is to show an interest in London life, indirectly creating a connection with the audience. For a Japanese audience they might talk about their Made-in-Japan car and on French television it's all about the fabulous French cuisine and the Riviera.

Some of the famous stretch their fame as when Bono from U2 tries to change the World by meeting statesmen, when Sting tries to save the rainforests or Madonna adopts a child in Africa.

From these stars you can learn an extremely professional approach with a personal touch to the specific market.

If you don't have an actual current project and need to stay in the public eye, you can 'borrow' another cause, and thus gain the extra exposure.

If you are a big star, the media are very interested in any public events and special occasions in which you appear .

If there isn't any occasion, you had better find one. If you are amongst the most famous, leaving your wife or husband, finding a new lover, going to a party with a royal family member, getting rid of a depression or getting indicted for a violent burst (most frequently against the paparazzi) will do the trick and keep the phone ringing constantly. Costume malfunctions as those experienced by Janet Jackson, Paris Hilton and Britney Spears can also do the trick.

### **You have to be famous to become famous**

Things do not work that way for "ordinary" people. The media are not that good at handling Mr. and Ms. Average. You have to be famous to get even more famous in the media. Most people find that difficult because they aren't famous to start with.

However, you can triumph over this intractable Gordian Knot by identifying the people you wish to be exposed to through the media. Apart from the X-factor wannabes most people do not want to become famous just to be famous. Therefore the visibilityexposure should have a target.

The media can be used for that purpose: if you are looking for a new job, you often have to highlight your professional qualities. If you are going to raise money for a new project,

the idea should be introduced as being workable and profitable. If you want to further your position within the company, you have to expose what you have achieved for the company. If you want to stress that you and your company are the world's best candidate to solve a problem for potential customers that should be the message.

The media will not always let you through to its columns, loudspeakers or screens in the first attempt. The news desk likes to see itself as being critical, especially when they are journalists or editors and did not *come up with* the story themselves. Therefore it's a good idea to let them do exactly that.

The problem is that it is hard to be the happy messenger yourself. You have to find a messenger and it is not that easy. You cannot even buy an instant messenger, because most journalists are not happy about getting the story through a PR agency even if the story is worthy of the front-page.

The solution to being ignored by the media is in your ability to create real news. It might be that you will make an investigation or analysis which you can comment on, putting yourself in the position of an expert. Another possibility is to write a feature, an opinion piece or establish a debate. Some people find success by simply grabbing the phone or sending an email with a headline that makes sense to the journalist or to the news desk.

Others create an event that is so unique that it is exposed everywhere in the media.

### **Exposure worth millions**

Personal branding is worth millions and for the elite few maybe billions if practiced at the right time and place. But if you think success in branding comes by making breaking news, at a cost to be paid later, you could find yourself the broken one, as was the story with Jan Bonde Nielsen. This international businessman, now exiled to London and involved in Russian adventures, gave himself a dizzying roller coaster ride with the Danish press during his takeover of the ailing Danish shipyard B&W. In an attempt to raise more money from the banks, he made a master plan to have the same important story in all the major Danish media at the same time. His strategy was daring: He invited all the media of importance - within intervals of half an hour - to his office and promised each newspaper, television and radio station exclusive right to the story, if they agreed to publish the story as front page news the very next day. He succeeded with his plan but at a high price. Everyone in the media considered him a "dead man walking", and business journalists went for his jugular from that one glorious day onwards. Eventually he had to give up his ownership of the shipyard and fled the country. The moral: Never mislead the press.

Many readers of this book would say that they are not quite Socrates or Jesus. That they lack what famous film stars and artists have, are not in quite the same league as entrepreneurs like Richard Branson or on top of their business as the cofounder, chairman and CEO of Apple, Steve Jobs. There is a limit to how many of us can be business leaders of the Fortune 500 companies.

You do not need to be: ultimately all that matters is that the media and others like them who can affect our future will listen to our story and then decide if they will act upon it. There are other means to be heard than the classic media; such as being visible in in-house or external company publications, to do company or product presentations, or to do speeches at conferences and seminars. Being for instance an external lecturer at the

right places - such as business schools - can also promote your personal branding to a level that is just right for you.

### **Victory through words, not weapons**

If you master the art of oratory it might prove useful to give speeches. All a convincing speech takes is an ability to write the words and later say them - as if it came from the heart. To be a public speaker can be an onerous task, such as when one has to motivate a group of recalcitrant employees. Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) had just that special gift. Just read his proclamation from April 26 1796 to his armies in Italy- just before the battle of Lodi:

*"Soldiers:*

*In a fortnight you have won six victories, taken twenty-one standards, fifty-five pieces of artillery, several strong positions, and conquered the richest part of Piedmont; you have captured 15,000 prisoners and killed or wounded more than 10,000 men.*

*Heretofore you fought for sterile rocks, made famous by your courage, but useless to the fatherland; today, by your accomplishments you equal the [French] armies of Holland and the Rhine. Destitute of everything you have supplied everything. You have won battles without cannon crossed rivers without bridges, made forced marches without shoes, camped without brandy and often without bread. Only republican phalanxes, soldiers of liberty, could have endured what you have endured.*

*Soldiers, you have our thanks! The grateful nation will owe its prosperity to you.*

*But, soldiers, as yet you have done nothing compared with what remains to be done. Neither Turin nor Milan belongs to you.*

*Soldiers, your fatherland has the right to expect great things of you. Will you justify its faith? The greatest obstacles have been overcome; but you still have battles to fight, cities to take, rivers to cross. Which of you lacks courage? Which of you prefers to return across the summits of the Apennines and the Alps to bear patiently the insults of that slavish soldiery? No, there is no one among the conquerors of Montenotte, of Dego, of Mondovi. Everyone is burning to extend the glory of the French people; everyone wishes to humiliate those haughty kings who dare contemplate binding us in fetters. Everyone wishes to dictate a glorious peace...*

*Everyone wishes to return to his native village and be able to say proudly: "I was with the victorious army of Italy!"*

*Friends, I promise you this conquest; but there is one condition you must swear to fulfil. That is to respect the people whom you liberate, to repress the horrible pillage which certain scoundrels incited by our enemies commit. Without this you will not be the liberators of the people but their scourge; you will not do honour to the French people, but will disgrace them. . . . Pillagers will be shot without mercy; already, several have been...."*

What did Napoleon actually do? He inflamed the troops' will to fight by listing their previous deeds, which are presented as equals to his other armies' quite amazing victories. He told them that they could expect more of the same hard fighting and that France totally relied on their efforts. There would be more deprivations, but not one of these heroes would give up this chance to do his duty. And he reminded them that they should not make more enemies than necessary - so they should behave well towards civilians.

Observe how skilfully Napoleon dealt with the facts of the previous battles: when you refer to a victory, be able to quantify the victory - the taking of standards, canons, prisoners - and most tellingly the number of wounded and killed.

### **Practice is a precondition**

You can find inspiration for good speeches and lectures on the internet, in books, newspapers and magazines. An important element is to create visuals that convey the most vital facts - many use Power Point - but watch out that they do not detract or distract from you as a person.

Many of us in behaviour remind of the American psychologist B.F. Skinner's examination of the formation of superstition in pigeons: Skinner placed a series of hungry pigeons in a cage attached to an automatic mechanism that delivered food to the pigeon "at regular intervals with no reference whatsoever to the bird's behaviour." He discovered that "the pigeons associated the delivery of the food with whatever chance actions they had been performing the moment it was delivered, and that they subsequently continued to perform these same actions in the hope it would bring more food".

We learn of our experiences from performing in different types of human gatherings.

You can of course learn how to speak effectively by having your performance video-taped and critiqued, but you can also take lessons from an actor or an opera singer with some direction experience. Learn how to move and act, breathe, speak, mime and to move on stage. It might cost you £ 50 (US \$70) to £ 200 (US \$285) an hour, but the money is well spent. However, one should always remember that personal branding is not the same as acting a role. Personal branding is focused on being true to oneself and to promote the qualities that you and others perceive as valuable. If you want to act roles, you should join a drama school rather than do it through your profession. Come to think of it, though, it might prove useful to be active in the local amateur theatre - where one as a speaker-to-be can learn to use the space on the stage.

Most large companies have their own communication departments and internal media - some aimed at customers or clients, others for employees. The communication officers often have a broader experience of how to attract attention than just writing press releases and writing and editing corporate media. They can in most cases advise you how to proceed with your personal branding within the company. The condition is that you have a clear idea of your target audience and of your message. If you do not have a specific message to convey, it might still be a good idea to establish contact: often the communication department is in need of statements about events in the company or positive news involving customers - remember pictures to go with the story. As is customary at conventional media like newspapers, trade magazines and weekly magazines, radio, television and the web-media, a shortlist is often used by the communication officers since they prefer to speak to people they are already acquainted with. They also know and value the importance of building relationships they can have confidence in. Being on a communication officer's or journalist's shortlist comes with one requirement: you must be able to respond swiftly to their enquiries. Journalists are not known for their patience - neither in the press nor in communication departments - and hence a quick response is the basis for retaining good relations - and staying on the shortlist.

## **Personal branding creates contacts**

What is all this fuss about personal branding when it is just about talking to the right people at the right time? When it comes down to basics, it is merely a question of knowing the right business leaders and maybe a handful of the most influential executive search consultants, is it not?

Even persons with the best contacts cannot progress this way because promotion or employment decisions are seldom made by any one single person – no matter how lofty a position the person possesses. The trend is that the management team is the final green-light giver. It is rarely the CEO and far more frequently the management team that has to clean up in the wake of a failed placement.

So we are back on the track: personal branding is the public projection of your personality and your abilities in a configuration that furthers your unique career aspirations. In creating and advancing a career it has become ever more important to prove that you have crossed the threshold from merely good to excellent. Already in that subject there is a world of difference.

In many ways, personal branding is an exhausting burden to shoulder. Personal branding is a phenomenon that is never fulfilled or satiated, must both be fed and walked often and it requires an outstanding degree of continuous innovation. Some would compare personal branding to a dog rather than a child - we will also find those that compare the phenomenon with a life partner. Maybe the latter comparison is the better one for personal branding should be handled with care, respect and a certain degree of love. In return, you will add a new dimension to your personality that promises immense rewards. Not only in the business world, but also in your private life. Of course you are already something in yourself - otherwise you would not take interest in the matter. And it is a confirmation of the self to watch yourself on television, in print, or on the internet, listen to yourself on the radio, or to go on stage with the message that you burn for. Can this match anything in life? Yes, and this feeling has something in common with carnal desires: it is here to stay.