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# The Importance of Personal Branding in Social Media: Educating Students to Create and Manage their Personal Brand

**Katryna M. Johnson**

Professor of Marketing

Metropolitan State University

College of Management

1501 Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis, MN 55403-1897

United States of America

## Abstract

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*The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of developing, maintaining and promoting one's personal brand. Personal branding is the process by which an individual actively tries to manage others' impressions of their skills, abilities and experiences. Self-awareness and understanding one's strengths and weaknesses in order to effectively present the self is essential to building a personal brand. Students need to understand the concept of personal branding and how actions they engage today, especially in social media, can affect their future. Making students aware of the process of personal branding assists them in regulating their postings and disclosures on social media. Many tools are available on social media to convey one's personal brand such as LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, Facebook, Vimeo, YouTube and blogs. Providing students with tips on how to best convey their image on social media will help them be successful in building their careers. Examples of class assignments from students use of blogs, Pinterest and LinkedIn will be discussed.*

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**Keywords:** Personal branding, social capital, social networking, self-presentation, social media

## 1. Introduction

The average person today spends 118 minutes per day on social media ("Daily time spent", 2016). Teens spend even more time averaging an amazing nine hours each day (Willett, 2016). This provides ample opportunity for people to share their personal stories, upload pictures, comment on tweets and "like" posts that they read. While some individuals maintain professional profiles on sites such as LinkedIn, others continuously upload photos of themselves partying or engaging in questionable behavior.

At times, young adults do not realize the potential long-term impact that negative information can have on their future careers (Tufecki, 2008) and seemed surprised to learn that human resource departments do use social media to review potential candidates (Labreque, Markos & Milne, 2010; Stevens, 2016; Wetsch, 2012). It is incumbent upon educators to teach students about personal branding.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Personal Branding

Personal branding is the practice of marketing oneself to society (Brooks & Anumudu, 2015; Gehl, 2011; Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005; Khedher, 2014 & 2015; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Peters, 1997; Rampersad, 2001; Shepherd, 2005). An individual's personal brand is a reflection of his or her skills, abilities and lifestyle (Gehl, 2011; Hearn, 2008; Peters, 1997). Developing a personal brand is an ongoing process that involves interactions with others in face-to-face communication and online (Hearn, 2008, Khedher, 2015; Peters, 1997; Vitberg, 2009). Students need to understand and deliberately cultivate their digital presence. Educators need to teach students about the social processes and artifacts that influence perception so that students can better maintain and control their personal brand (Hearn, 2008; Montoya & Vandehey, 2009).

## 2.2 Presentation of the Self

Underpinning the concept of personal branding is self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). Goffman discussed how each of us may try to influence the manner in which others see us. Self-presentation is the mechanism that allows an individual to convey information to the world to influence perception (Chen, 2013; Goffman, 1959; Khedher, 2015; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Personal branding in social media is the process of taking control of the impressions one is making in the virtual world (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Students self-present on a daily basis as they choose what clothes to wear, which car to drive and how they interact with others (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Online, students post pictures and videos, make comments and share information. Viewing the Internet as a world stage, we can clearly see how one has the world at its fingertips for creating impressions.

## 2.3 Importance of Personal Branding

Understanding the importance of one's personal brand has been the subject of much discussion (Brooks & Anumudu, 2015; Montoya and Vandehey, 2002; Hearn, 2008; Morgan, 2011; Peters, 1997; Wetsch, 2012). Students need to understand that their behavior online can impact potential employers' perceptions of them. When teaching about personal branding, some students are resistant to the idea that images or information posted on social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter could be used by organizations in the hiring process (Brooks & Anumudu, 2015; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Stevens, 2016; Tufecki, 2012).

Human Resources have used social media sites to observe potential employees for some time (Labreque, Markos & Milne, 2010; Ward & Yates, 2013; Wetsch, 2012). Career Builder indicated that 60% of employers have used social networking information to hire candidates (Grasz, 2016). Information on a candidate's job qualifications, skills and perception of ability to fit with an organization positively influence hiring, while inappropriate photos, use of alcohol or drugs, and discriminatory comments negatively influence hiring. Making students aware of these concerns assists them in regulating their postings and disclosures on social media.

Social media can be used to increase one's social capital (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Fieseler & Fleck, 2013; Gehl, 2011; Hearn, 2008; Khedher, 2014 & 2015). Social capital refers to the ability to use resources and engage in mutually advantageous social cooperation through a social network (Ellison et al., 2007). Research on social media has indicated that one's social capital can be improved or damaged through interactions in one's social network (Ellison et al., 2007; Hampton & Wellman, 2003). Gehl, (2011, p. 4) indicated that personal branding "essentially offers a technique for individuals to increase their social capital as a means to flexibly adapt to changing labor markets".

## 2.4 Personal S.W.O.T Analysis

Self-awareness is essential to building a personal brand (Brooks & Anumudu, 2015; Gehl, 2011; Morgan, 2011; Poepelman & Blacksmith, 2014). Students must understand their skills, abilities, knowledge, talent, personality, strengths and weaknesses and what others see in them. Conducting a personal S.W.O.T. analysis allows students to identify internal strengths and weaknesses and evaluate outside opportunities and threats (Brooks & Anumudu, 2015; McCorkle and McCorkle, 2012; Rampersad, 2011). The internal portion of the S.W.O.T. enables students to assess their current strengths (e.g. education) and weaknesses (e.g. communication skills) so that they can communicate their strengths and work on the weaknesses. The external analysis allows students to examine current market trends for job opportunities and consider threats such as other students competing for a job (McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012).

## 2.3 Personal Branding Statement

Once the personal S.W.O.T. has been completed, students need to develop a personal branding statement that highlights their unique value proposition (Brooks & Anumudu, 2015; Clark, 2011; Khedher, 2014 & 2015; Morgan, 2011; Peters, 1997; Rampersad, 2011; Shepherd, 2005; Stanton & Stanton, 2013). Students should identify a target market (e.g. potential employer) for their message and highlight their personal skills and knowledge (Clark, 2011; Harris & Rae, 2011; Hughes, 2013; Peters, 1997).

A personal branding statement gives individuals the ability to differentiate themselves from the crowd (Harris & Rae, 2011). A personal branding statement identifies what you do, how you do it, why people should care and what makes you unique (Hughes, 2013). An example of a personal branding statement is as follows "I'm a technology entrepreneurial marketer with a passion for building teams of brand advocates by fostering relationships with customers and users" (Hughes, 2013, para. 8). This statement allows potential employers to identify the key skills and strengths of a potential candidate.

### 3. Tips for Personal Branding

There are many suggestions on the factors that are important in communicating a personal brand. Professionally it is vital that students emphasize their knowledge, experience and skills. Students should also demonstrate their abilities, be authentic and reveal their character (Rampersad, 2001, Shah 2017). Individuals should be positive, professional, interesting and responsive when communicating online (Montoya & Vandehey, 2002; Rampersad, 2001; Schwabel, 2009a, Shah 2017).

Students also need to consider their personal appearance. One's appearance should be professional and have a positive fit with an organization (Schwabel, 2009a; Vara, 2010). Appearance is not limited to one's physical appearance but also to emotional appearance (Vara, 2010). "Your emotional appearance is the words you say and the actions you take" (Vara, 2010, para. 4). The image people have of us and our personal brand is influenced by our daily lives and how we interact with others. A person's external appearance may portray a professional image, but it is also important that a person's behavior do so as well (Vara, 2010).

Much of the discussion on personal branding suggests that it is important to be consistent in portraying one's brand in social media across professional and personal sites (Montoya & Vandehey, 2002; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Shah, 2017; Shepherd, 2005). However, in life we often have multiple identities such as colleague, family member or student (Goffman 1956; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Portrayal of one's self on a social media site such as Facebook may differ from one's LinkedIn Profile. In relation to one's professional life, it is essential to maintain a consistent and professional appearance (Labreque, Markos & Milne, 2010; Shah, 2017). Studies have found that unprofessional behavior and appearance on any type of social media site can hurt a career (Labreque, Markos & Milne; 2010; Tufecki, 2012).

Shepherd (2005, p. 600) states "the drift of most expert advice seems to be that individuals can no longer afford to express the multiple personalities they used to have, or to live a life with varying attitudes and contrasting goals". A possible solution is to separate these identities for some social media sites such as Facebook or Pinterest by keeping them private and accessible only to friends and family (Tufecki, 2008)

### 4. Tools for Personal Branding in Social Media

Teaching students about social media tools and the fundamentals of personal branding is essential to one's career (Clark, 2011; Gehl, 2011; Harris and Rae, 2011; Rampersad, 2001; Ward & Yates, 2013). Tools for personal branding are various and include blogging, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram, Quora, Slideshare, podcasts, wikis, and videocasts (Chen, 2013; Clark, 2011; Elmore, 2010; Harris & Rae, 2011; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Pace, 2008; Poepelman & Blacksmith, 2014; Vitberg, 2009). It is important students keep their profiles current, convey academic and business history, and provide a concise list of accomplishments and career goals (Clark, 2011; Elmore, 2010; Morgan, 2011).

LinkedIn is the top professional site for demonstrating one's professional knowledge and skills (McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012; Poepelman & Blacksmith, 2014; Schwabel, 2009b). It is important for students to maintain a virtual resume where they can showcase their skills and abilities (Elmore, 2010; Marcus, Machilek & Schutz, 2006; McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012; Morgan, 2011; Schau & Gilly, 2003). LinkedIn profiles should include a recent, professional photo and accurate academic and personal history highlighting personal accomplishments (Morgan, 2011). Students should provide keywords on their LinkedIn Profile to assist search engines and recruiters in finding their profile (Schwabel, 2009b).

#### 4.1 Professional Storytelling

The ability to share one's stories, knowledge and experiences can be communicated through many social media sites (Blair, 2015; Brooks & Anumudu, 2015). Creating a narrative (telling one's professional story) online allows students to present their knowledge, skills and work experience to demonstrate how they have progressed along their career path and why they have chosen this career. This narrative may then also be used in face-to-face settings such as when a student is interviewed for a job.

YouTube is one option for telling one's story and demonstrating one's abilities. YouTube allows students the ability to openly communicate via video and receive feedback (Chen, 2013; Pace, 2008). Personalities, body language and knowledge can clearly be portrayed in a visual format that might not be observed otherwise. Presentations can be taped and posted to one's LinkedIn site, Vimeo or YouTube (Pace 2008).

Students can also use their Facebook site for personal branding (Biba, 2011; Schawbel, 2009a). As mentioned previously, individuals can maintain a private and a public Facebook profile (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Schwabel, 2009a; Tufekci, 2012). Users should understand who their audience is for each profile (family and friends vs. colleagues). Profiles should be filled out completely and privacy settings should be reviewed to ensure that certain people do or do not have access to the profile (such as potential employers). Students should keep their photos and posts professional and update their status frequently (Schwabel, 2009a).

Twitter can also be used to exhibit one's personal brand (Claucherty, 2013; Harris and Rae, 2011; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Poepelman and Blacksmith, 2014). Students should claim their Twitter handle (domain name) that is reflective of their surname so they can easily be found (Claucherty, 2013). Language and photos should be kept professional, bios should reflect relevant information on business knowledge and experience, and links should be provided to other social media sites (Clauchery, 2013).

Visual media platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram allow students the opportunity to use pictures, videos and image oriented illustrations of themselves and their abilities. Practitioners have suggested that when using visual platforms for personal branding it is important to optimize one's profile, be authentic, engage with followers, maintain a theme and to post on a consistent schedule (Lacy, 2012).

Blogs can demonstrate one's personal voice and command of language by allowing individuals to tell their story and demonstrate knowledge (Blair, 2015; Clark, 2011; Elmore, 2010; Harris & Rae, 2011). Additionally, in blogging, video can be used which communicates body language and tone of voice to allow for a more complete perspective of a person. Students should keep their blogs and online profiles up to date and be responsive to inquiries (Elmore, 2010; Gehl, 2011; Vitberg, 2009).

#### **4.2 Reputation Management**

Web sites such as BrandYourself, Vizify, VizualizeMe and AboutMe are available to assist students with improving their personal brand (Jackson, 2012). These sites allow students to control how they appear in search engines (Jackson, 2012). Students can submit the sites they want people to find when searching for them (such as LinkedIn or Pinterest) and increase the rankings in the search engines so the sites will be more likely to appear. Some of the sites can track visitors, some help with resumes and other sites allow integrate blogs, videos and photos.

#### **5. Tracking a Personal Brand**

It is imperative to monitor one's personal brand (Gehl, 2011; Shah, 2017). NameChk can help students find if their name is available on a social networking site. Google Alert and SocialMention can be used to track keywords (such as one's name) on the Internet to assess who and how frequently people or companies are searching for you. Naymz will help measure and manage one's social reputation.

Students can monitor their personal brand "through tools such as Google Alert (which allows them to know who has searched for them), Klout (which is a score on influence on Twitter) or Social Mention to determine if their name is being discussed in social media" (Gehl, 2011, p. 7). Social mention is a real-time search engine that allows one to monitor one's named based on four measures: Strength, Sentiment, Passion and Reach (Gehl, 2011). "Strength is the likelihood that your brand is being discussed in social media, Sentiment is a ratio of positive mentions to negative, Passion is a measure of how often people are discussing the subject, and Reach is a measure of the diversity of mentions of the topic" (Gehl, 2011, p. 16).

#### **6. Course Assignments**

I have used several social media tools to teach personal branding. I use videos from YouTube to explain the concept of personal branding and discuss how it can be exhibited in social media. When I began teaching personal branding, I used wikis and blogs to have students demonstrate their knowledge. Students were asked to post information about the class project and course concepts. I found that many students were posting videos or photos rather than writing and asked them for feedback as to what social media tool they would prefer to use. The overwhelming response was to use a microblog such as Twitter or visual social media tools such as Instagram or Pinterest. Based on information in Forbes that Pinterest was the rising star in social media (Griswold, 2013), I chose Pinterest. In a different course I have had students create LinkedIN profiles to help them establish a presence online and to network.

**6.1 Pinterest Assignment.** Students were asked to create at least five boards on Pinterest that are related to the class topics and one for their course project. Some of the questions students have had included:

- What type of boards should we have?
- What should I name the boards?
- What should I pin?
- Do I need to create pins?
- Who do we follow?

I instruct students to follow me on Pinterest as I have created 43 boards related to my classes and research. This allows students to see the type of boards that would be appropriate for the assignment. I tell students that board titles should reflect the content of the board. I also give instruction on whom they should follow by indicating they can look at those that I follow and also by searching for topic areas. Students are not required to create their own pins but can re-pin from individuals on Pinterest. Students are required to pin at least five infographics or images to each board.

### 6.1.1 Methodology and Data Analysis

Each semester I ask students for an end-of-the semester reflection on concepts or assignments they felt were most relevant to their lives and work. I then perform a content analysis of the papers to assess common themes in learning. Student responses have indicated that Pinterest allows them to:

- Showcase their work
- Network with others in their field
- Learn about new concepts
- Organize – helps students remember the source of where they found information
- Collaborate with peers on projects

### 6.2 LinkedIn Assignment.

In order to help students establish a professional presence online I have had them create LinkedIn profiles and connect to professional groups. Students are told to include their name, professional looking photo, summary statement on career goals, information on their skills, work experience, education and resume. They are required to connect to five other students in the class and to two professional organizations in their major.

#### 6.2.1 Methodology and Data Analysis

I assess student learning on this assignment through a one page paper in which I ask:  
At the end of the semester you will write a **one to two-page paper** on the three topics/assignments/discussions (any aspect of the course) that were most important to you in the course. Discuss why the topics were relevant in your life. In addition, please discuss if you find the LinkedIn assignment helpful and if you currently use or plan to use LinkedIn in the future.

Students have indicated that they greatly appreciate the networking, ability to promote their skills and work experience and the opportunity for career development through the business-related groups they have joined.

LinkedIn was a great task to take on for that it allows me to build a network of existing contacts, which allows you to discover outside links.

Creating the LinkedIn was extremely helpful. I have already made several connections and am looking forward to the opportunities that will come from it. This is probably the best thing I have gotten from this class. I never knew just how helpful it could be to have one. Hopefully this will open many doors for me as I move on in the business world.

I perform a content analysis on the papers to assess learning. Students have indicated the following benefits:

- Building a network
- Connecting to professional associations
- Learning new concepts and more about their major (job and career knowledge)
- Finding job opportunities
- Promoting skills, abilities and work experience

## 7.0 Conclusion

Building one's personal brand is a continual process. Not only do students need to stay current with social media and industry trends, they need to be aware of the perceptions they are forming in the minds of others. Students have indicated that teaching them about personal branding is a valuable experience.

Students need to understand that face-to-face and online interactions impact other people's perceptions of their brand. Having good written and oral communication skills and demonstrating expertise in one's field are keys to developing a strong personal brand. Many tools are available for students to use in social media to exhibit and monitor their personal brand.

Students should take advantage of multiple platforms to communicate their personal brand. As educators, we should incorporate assignments into our classes such as developing a personal brand statement or demonstrating one's personal brand on social media to facilitate students' transition into their careers.

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