

Branding in Perspective: Self-Branding for Professional Success

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Overview

Branding has been a key part of business and marketing for several millennia (not centuries, millennia). In this paper, we begin with a discussion about general branding concepts and the evolution of branding, brand positioning, brand equity, communications, and corporate branding. Then we turn to a specific use of branding—self-branding—which needs to be understood within the context of branding overall. We present an overview of self-branding and then describe the steps in self-branding, differentiation/positioning, self-brand management and re-invention, the online self-brand, and several real examples of successful and unsuccessful self-branding. Conclusions and recommendations are offered. An extensive literature review is provided.

Introduction

According to a global consortium of marketing associations, the term “brand” is defined as a “name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from those of other sellers” (“Common Language in Marketing: Dictionary”). Yet, this simple term has many interpretations and has spawned thousands of articles in the academic and trade literature.

We often think of branding as first coming of age during the Industrial Revolution when mass production, standardized packaging, and mass communication began to emerge. However, brands in some form or other have existed for several millennia.

In their article, “The Birth of Brand: 4000 Years of Branding,” Moore and Reid (2008, p. 421) set out four main theses: (1) “Brands, from all periods in history, display two characteristics related to the conveyance of information to stakeholders: information with the purpose of indicating the origin of the product and information about quality. (2) “The evolution of brands shows a movement to greater complexity in character, including the addition of image or meaning (power, value and/or personality) to the list of information elements.” (3) “Brands, from ancient times to now, played critical roles not only for end customers, but for also for stakeholders throughout the channel.” (4) “Brands existed prior to the 20th century, but should more accurately be referred to as proto-brands. A characteristic of some proto-brands is differentiation information to help with the logistical functions of marketing. Logistical information in today’s brands is usually provided separately through a barcode or on separate labels but is not combined with the brand itself.”

This article takes the “brand” connotation further than the definition cited above. After exploring various elements of brands and branding, we look at the aspect of branding known as the “self-brand” or “personal brand.” Self-branding represents how we want to be perceived by employers,

potential employers, clients, professional peers, and others in a way that enhances our short- and long-term career perspectives. For us in our career roles, self-branding can be a great marketing asset or a drain on our career potential. By taking a strategic marketing perspective with our self-branding, we can greatly enhance our chances for success—just like companies and their products do.

Because self-branding is a sub-set of branding, in this article, we examine these topics—to place self-branding in the proper context :

- The evolution of branding concepts
- Brand positioning
- Generating brand equity/strength
- The role of communications, including new media
- Corporate branding
- Self-branding

The Evolution of Branding Concepts

Branding has come a long way over the last four millennia. One simple definition does not really do justice to the wide-ranging uses of brands today. To again quote from Moore and Reid (2008, p. 419): “We observe a gradual transition from a more utilitarian provision of information regarding origin and quality to the addition of more complex brand image characteristics over time, including status/power, added value, and finally, the development of brand personality.”

More recently, Millard Brown Optimator’s Mario Simon (2011), wrote that:

In 1980, we found that almost the entire value of an average S&P 500 firm consisted of tangible assets. Thirty years later, tangible assets accounted for only 30 to 40 percent of the value. About half of intangible value—close to 30 percent of total business value—is attributed to brand. For many firms, brand is the single biggest asset. As people find basic consumption needs satisfied and focus on higher meaning in making brand choices, companies can to re-invent themselves through their brands. Therefore, when a brand has built a strong connection with its customer base, it has created the ultimate source of differentiation and, therefore, competitive advantage.

An examination of a review article by Stern (2006) highlights the complexity of brand meanings and the lack of consensus on what a “brand” really represents. As Jones and Bonevac (2013, p. 112) conclude: “Branding has a branding problem. There is no consensus about how to define ‘brand’.”

Brand Characteristics

There are several ways for us to better understand “brands.” Let us examine several of them.

In its earliest use, branding was used mostly to identity a product category. It rarely had a primary demand function. Consider salt, sugar, tea, coffee, and soap as examples. Only later, did branding take on the role of stimulating selective demand for particular providers, such as Morton’s Salt and Levi’s Jeans. For at least the past 60 years, the academic literature has examined these two vitally important topics -- “primary demand” and “selective demand”—which are more critical today than ever due to the level of competition around the world. See, for example, Lockley (1955), Bliss (1956), Buchanan (1965), Leone (1983), Chakravarti and Janiszewski (2004), Rahman and Areni (2014), and

Evans and Berman (2015). As a rule, demand for a product category must first be generated; then, demand for a specific brand within that category can be stimulated. Thus, if consumers' primary demand for mobile devices continues to increase rapidly, selective demand for specific brands will be easier to attain. The opposite scenario is also true.

What exactly comprises a distinctive brand? This is another topic that has been widely debated. To summarize one popular view, let us turn to Zaichkowsky (2010, p. 548):

Brand identity complements brand equity and it forms an important part of the strategic management of brands. Identity elements include a well-known brand name, logo, font type, symbols, color, shape, as well as unique product and benefit descriptions. These different elements can contribute to distinct consumer perceptions of various brands in the marketplace and help to differentiate brands from competitors. Brand managers need to use the appropriate identity elements to build the brand. Some brand identity components may be influential to choice at the subconscious level of consumers, and therefore the understanding of individual psychological processes of perception and social meaning is required by brand managers.

Although the move to global brands by many companies has increased in recent years, this approach may not be feasible or desirable due to language, cultural, economic, and other factors. For a sampling of the literature on this, see Roth (1995); Alden, Steenkamp, and Batra (1999); Hsieh (2004); Chow and Amir (2006); Cayla and Arnould (2008); Chang (2008); Nijssen and Douglas (2011); Swoboda, Pennemann, and Taube (2012); Guo (2013); and Zarantonello, Schmitt, and Jedidi (2014).

Brand mantras (brand visions), have taken on greater significance for many firms. With a brand mantra, a firm guides employees and marketing partners as to the purpose and distinctiveness of the firm and its brands. (See McWilliam and Dumas, 1997). As Keller (1999a, p. 45) said:

Brand mantras are three to five word phrases that capture the irrefutable essence or spirit of the brand positioning. Their purpose is to ensure that all employees within the organization as well as external marketing partners understand what the brand most fundamentally is to represent with consumers so that they can adjust their actions accordingly. Brand mantras provide guidance as to what products to introduce under the brand, what ad campaigns to run, where and how the brand should be sold, and so on. The influence of brand mantras can extend beyond these tactical concerns. They may even guide the most seemingly unrelated or mundane decisions such as the look of a reception area, the way phones are answered, and so on. In effect, brand mantras are designed to create a mental filter to screen out "brand inappropriate" marketing activities or actions of any type that may have a bearing on customers' impressions of a brand.

Virtually everyone today agrees that brand success is tied to the consumer's perceiving a unique and desirable meaning for that brand. This has been recognized for quite a while. As William D. Tyler (then Chairman of the Plans Board for the Leo Burnett advertising agency) noted in 1957 (p. 163):

We have suddenly rediscovered that an emotional *feeling* about the product can be the strongest selling point that many items—for which no specific product advantage exists—can have. This may not be any great new revelation. It was used with success the last time around when we had rollicking prosperity in the land. That was during the 'twenties. In those days, it was known as snob appeal. It did not take the deepest kind of thought to come up with the concept that lots of people want to use the kind of product that the people whom they admire, envy, and emulate use. This was the first writing in the primeval ooze of the image-projection concept in advertising.

For similar perspectives, see also Reynolds (1965); Ross (1971); and Kum, Bergkvist, Lee, and Leong (2012). Nysveen and Pedersen (2014) take this one step further by discussing the role of consumers as brand co-creators.

Brand Extensions and Brand Dilution

In various situations, brand extension is utilized. Edward M. Tauber has been a pioneer in writing about this area; see Tauber's excellent Web site (2012) for his insights.

Here are some examples of types of brand extension:

- Line extension—whereby minor brand features are added to create new versions of the same basic product, such as Crest toothpaste introducing new flavors.
- Category expansion—whereby more extensive brand features are added to create new versions of the same basic product, as Tylenol introducing, cold, sinus, children's, and flu versions. All of these extensions are within the same general product category.
- Outside-the-category expansion -- whereby the same brand is introduced for new products not predicated on the original product, such as Costco regularly introducing new Kirkland-brand private-label products across all sorts of product categories. As Arm & Hammer proved with its baking soda—through new uses as a carpet cleaner, refrigerator deodorizer, spot remover, etc.—it is even possible for a brand to go outside its original product category with the product itself not changing at all.
- Sub-branding—whereby a parent brand is associated with a new version or model of a product, such as the hybrid electric Chevrolet Volt.

A crucial consideration (risk) with regard to brand extension is knowing how “elastic” the brand is (see Monga and John, 2010). How far can a company take brand extension before it dilutes the value of the overall brand? Consider these varying observations about brand dilution:

Our data suggest that well-established brand names can be hurt, in the eyes of consumers, by some brand extensions. Extensions delivering attributes at odds with what consumers expect from the family brand can produce dilution of the specific beliefs associated with the family brand. Though early research on dilution has failed to find much of a negative impact from brand extensions, our findings confirm that firms are at risk in launching brand extensions with attributes that are incompatible with or negate favorable family brand beliefs. Furthermore, the degree of risk is likely to vary as a function of several factors. (Loken and John, 1993, p. 81)

A product failure may not harm the parent brand if the extension category is far removed. Managers can be reassured that although there are many considerations that would influence a decision to attempt to stretch a brand into a more removed product category, the actual risk to the parent brand may not be as great as previously thought. (Sood and Keller, 2012, p. 380)

Stages of Branding

It is also widely agreed by industry and academic experts that branding should not be a one-shot exercise or a haphazard process of brand development. Instead, the process should be systematic and goal-oriented in nature. As Kohli and LaBahn (1997, p. 74) note:

Managers should: (1) Set clear objectives for the naming process. This can be drawn from the marketing strategy, especially a positioning statement for a product. (2) Create a reasonably long list of candidate names. This ensures a pool of alternatives. Traditional methods of brainstorming and individual creative thinking are useful and an excellent starting point. (3) Conduct a thorough evaluation of candidate names. Consider each criterion deemed appropriate for the product being introduced. Managers should plan carefully to ensure a complete and objective evaluation of the names. (4) Systematically apply the objectives and criteria specified in the earlier steps in choosing the final brand name. (5) Choose four to five names for submission to the Patent and Trademark Office for registration. Managers are well-advised to try to reflect the ‘marketing’ objectives in the names without unduly constraining themselves with trademark concerns.

These are just a few other examples of the extensive literature regarding the need for and the implementation of a systematic branding process: Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986); de Chernatony and McWilliam (1989); and Boatwright, Cagan, Kapur, and Saltiel. (2009).

Brand Gaps

One branding difficulty that may arise involves “brand gaps.” This occurs when brands are not perceived by customers, resellers, etc. as intended by the company. Corrective action (revamped ads, modified product features, and so forth) is then a must. Generally, these concepts come into play.

One, what are the ideal brand attributes desired by the target market for a given product? Two, how is a brand actually perceived by consumers? Three, what are the actual attributes that a given brand represents? An undesirable gap exists when the ideal brand is not what customers perceive that a company brand represents and/or when the perceived brand is not representative of the actual brand. In the first instance, consumers will not buy the company’s brand. In the latter instance, the consumer will not repurchase a brand that does not live up to expectations.

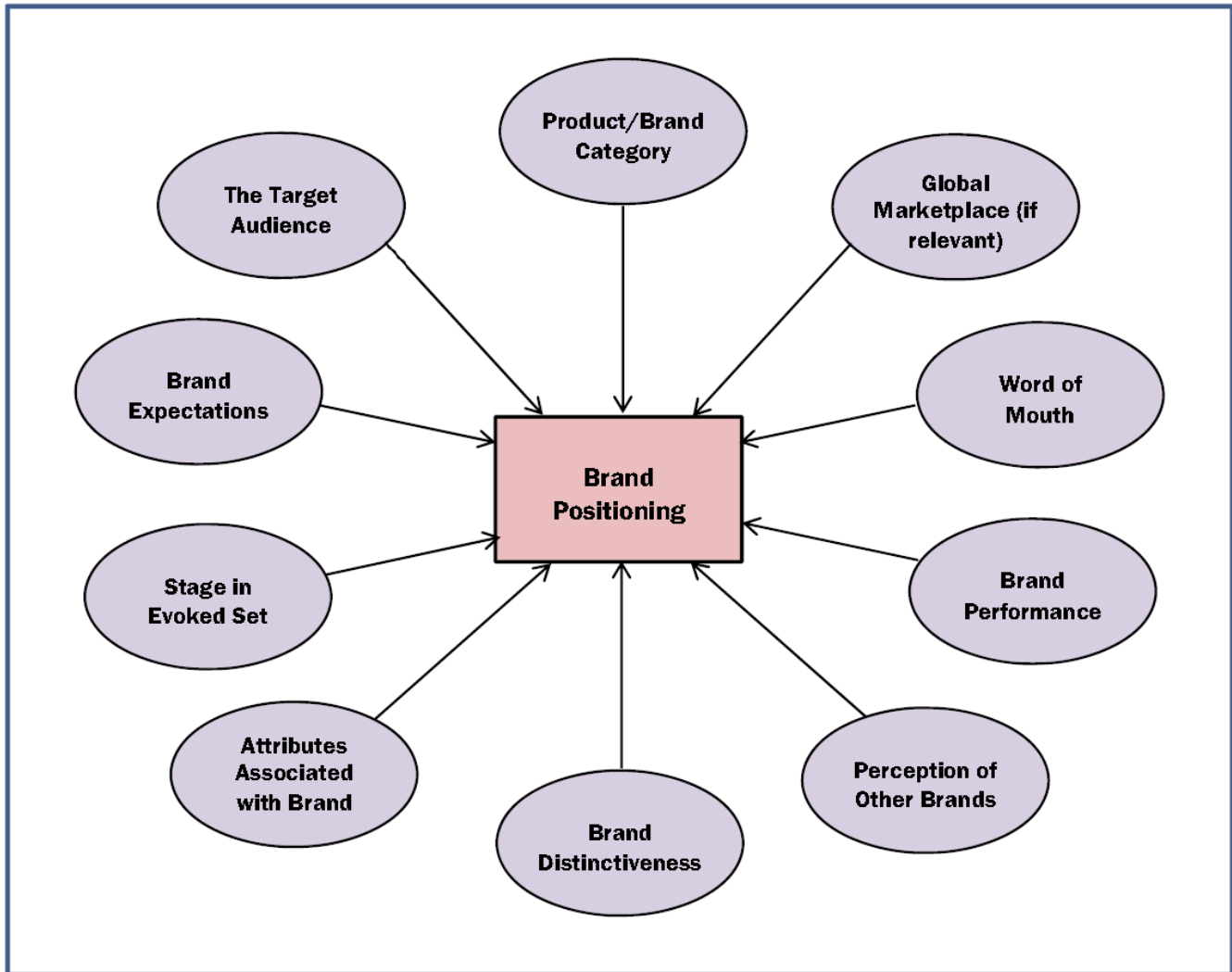
For a cross-section of the literature on brand gaps, see de Chernatony (1993); Miller and Berry (1998); de Chernatony (1999); Sääksjärvi and Samiee (2011); Anker, Kappel, Eadie, and Sandøe (2012); Romaniuk, Bogomolova, and Riley (2012); and da Silveira, Lages, and Simões (2013).

Brand Positioning

Brand positioning is a key element related to self-branding. As Evans and Berman state (2015, p. 310): With brand positioning, a firm [person] can map its brand/s in terms of target audience perceptions and desires, competition, other brands, and environmental changes. Perceptions are the brand images, both a firm’s [person’s] and competitors’, in people’s minds. Target audience desires refer to attributes which this audience would most like a brands to have—their ideal. A firm [person] will do well if its brand attributes are perceived as being close to the ideal.

Let us now discuss the factors shown in Figure 1 as they affect brand positioning.

Product/Brand Category—The way in which a brand is positioned is very much influenced by the general product category in which it resides (such as fine jewelry versus costume jewelry) as well as the more specific category in which it resides (such as fine watches versus inexpensive quartz watches). Consider this example from Punj and Moon (2002, p. 276):

Figure 1: Selected Factors That Affect a Brand's Positioning

If the information processing of color TVs as a product category is mostly guided by a few distinct brands, then the new brand's character may be best understood by relating it to an exemplar brand (e.g., a Sony). On the other hand, if information processing is mainly dominated by a mental representation formed from common product category attributes, then describing a new brand's performance on these attributes may be the best positioning option. In both instances, attributes typical of the category would be used since the positioning emphasis is on association.

The Target Audience—It is necessary to be clear about the target market/s sought for a positioning strategy to be effective. Because the relationship between brand positioning and the consumer's desired "self" have been widely covered in the literature, it is clear that the brand image projected must match with the desired "self" of the specified target market. For instance, see Dolich (1969); Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli (2007); Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, and Nyffenegger (2011); and Harmon-Kizer, Kumar, Ortinau, and Stock (2013).

Brand Expectations—For each brand category and target market, there is a separate set of expectations about a brand that impact its positioning. Typically, the goal is to attain "brand love"

(Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi, 2012) by the target audience. A way plot out brand expectations is to use brand concept (positioning) maps. Consider the work on this by John, et al., for example (2006):

The BCM method involves a consensus brand map, which identifies the core associations that consumers connect to the brand and how these associations are interconnected. Our approach gathers perceptions using structured elicitation, mapping, and aggregation procedures. First, elicitation can use existing consumer research, letting a firm reduce time and expense. Second, because mapping is structured, respondents can complete the task quickly, without extensive interviews. This makes BCM suitable for data collection venues such as mall intercepts and focus groups, and allows for collection of larger and broader samples. Finally, because aggregation involves relatively straightforward use of decision rules, obtaining a consensus brand map is less subjective and does not require specialized training. These advantages allow for construction of consensus brand maps for different market segments, geographic segments, or constituencies.

Stage in Evoked Set—The perception of a brand partially depends on where it falls in a consumer’s evoked set. This concept was first described by Howard (1963) more than 50 years and remains a vital process today. It was expanded by Narayana and Markin (1975, p. 1):

A consumer is either aware or unaware of the existence of any product class. The set of brands in a given product class of which the consumer is aware is denoted by the awareness set. It is from the brands in this set that a consumer makes a purchase choice. But a consumer is apt to reduce the deliberative dilemma by narrowing the category further and selecting from a smaller group of brands, often called an evoked set. Because the consumer appears to make a purchase decision for a product from among the brands in the evoked set, the seller must try to organize its efforts in such a way that its particular brand is positioned with those select few in the buyer’s cognitive field. This task involves more than simply ensuring consumer awareness of the brand’s existence.

Attributes Associated with Brand—Each brand represents several attributes. Some attributes may be unknown, perhaps because of the stage that the brand falls into within a target audience’s evoked set. Attributes that are known by the target audience may be tangible (such as miles per gallon or liter for a particular auto) and/or intangible (such as the feeling a consumer has when driving a given auto brand). All attributes known by the consumer—and perceived by him or her—contribute to a brand’s position. For example, see Aaker (1997), Ivens and Valta (2012), and Loroz and Braig (2015).

Brand Distinctiveness—A major work on brand distinctiveness remains Levitt’s (1980) “Marketing Success Through Differentiation—Of Anything.” Consider the meaning of an augmented product (p. 87):

Differentiation is not limited to giving the customer what he expects. What he expects may be augmented by things he has never thought about. When a computer manufacturer implants a diagnostic module that automatically locates the source of failure or breakdown inside his equipment (as some now do), he has taken the product beyond what was required or expected by the buyer. It has become an augmented product. When a securities brokerage firm includes with its customers’ monthly statements a current balance sheet for each customer and an analysis of sources and disposition of funds, that firm has augmented its product beyond what was required or expected by the buyer. When a manufacturer of health and beauty aids offers warehouse management advice and training programs for the employees of its distributors, that company too has augmented its product beyond what was required or expected by the buyer.

Perception of Other Brands—The positioning of a given brand is impacted by the existence of and perceived positioning of competitive brands, as these illustrations indicate. Manufacturer and private brands have distinct positions in the marketplace, most often driven by price (see Pepe, Abratt, and Dion 2012; and Choi and Fredj, 2013). Brand positioning competition varies by market segment and product sub-category (see Wedel and Zhang, 2004). Niche brands often compete better by not going head-on with large competitors (see Paharia, Avery, and Keinan, 2014). First-mover brands and second-mover brands frequently compete with one another throughout the consumer’s diffusion process (see Kim, 2013). Finally as David A. Aaker (2012, p. 43), puts it:

The most common basis of competition is to win the brand preference battle with a “my brand is better than your brand” strategy in well-established categories and sub-categories. Most marketing budgets are allocated in this way and generate no discernible change in sales or market share. None! There is too much market inertia. The second basis of competition is to win the brand relevance competition by creating new categories or sub-categories for which competitors are irrelevant and by building barriers that make it hard for them to become relevant. Winning this second competitive arena, with rare exceptions, is only way to gain real growth.

Brand Performance—Once a given brand has been bought, its actual performance relative to expectations then come into play. This applies to both goods and services. As Dwivedi (2014) notes:

The roles of performance satisfaction and perceived value cannot be understated, especially for purely intangible services. Without support from physical evidence, consumers are likely to base their brand evaluations heavily on whether their service expectations are being met and whether they feel that they are receiving value from a brand or not. Thus, firms must develop and nurture capabilities that are critical to providing customer satisfaction as well as value. Firms must communicate the service expectations that can be met. The failure to meet these expectations would result in consumer dissatisfaction with potentially serious repercussions.

Word of Mouth—After the target audience sees how well a given brand performs, word of mouth (WOM)—positive and/or negative—affects the brand’s positioning. The word-of-mouth process has greatly proliferated due to social media (eWOM). In a recent study, Lovett, Peres, and Shachar (2013) found that brands and WOM are closely related: “Brand characteristics play an important role in explaining the level of WOM. Furthermore, these results are consistent with the theoretical framework we present, which posits that the brand characteristics affect WOM through three drivers: social, emotional, and functional.” Communications are further discussed later in this paper.

Global View (if relevant)—For brands that are marketed in multiple countries, there are particular challenges in positioning related to language, culture, product uses, and other factors. A global brand may be harder to position consistently than regional or local brands. For good review articles, see Akaka and Alden (2010) and Hassan and Craft (2012).

Generating Brand Equity/Strength

With careful brand positioning, a firm seeks a good return on investment and strong brand equity. What exactly is brand equity? Here is one perspective (“Common Language in Marketing: Dictionary”):

The purpose of brand equity metrics is to measure the value of a brand. A brand encompasses the name, logo, image, and perceptions that identify a product, service, or provider in customers' minds. It takes shape in advertising, packaging, and other marketing communications, and becomes a focus of the consumer relationship. In time, a brand comes to embody a promise about the goods it identifies—a promise about quality, performance, or other dimensions of value, which can affect consumer choices among competing products. When consumers trust a brand and find it relevant, they may select offerings associated with that brand over those of competitors, even at a higher price. When a brand's promise extends beyond a particular product, its owner may leverage it to enter new markets. For these reasons, a brand can hold great value, known as brand equity.

There is a rich literature on brand equity. Here is a cross-section: Biel (1992); de Chernatony, Riley, and Harris (1998); Keller (1999b); Broyles, Schumann, and Leingpibul (2009); Das, Stenger, and Ellis (2009); French and Smith (2013); and Ahmad and Thyagaraj (2014).

The Role of Communications, Including New Media

As most firms recognize, the once standard communications model of advertising to consumers in a one-way conversation has been turned on its head by new media whereby consumers can widely discuss their likes, dislikes, and experiences with given brands. When a story about a brand goes "viral," it can have tremendous positive results, as with the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge which has raised tens of millions of dollars to fight this devastating disease. Or a viral campaign can have a strong negative impact, such as the social media backlash against a Nationwide Insurance TV commercial during the 2015 Super Bowl (O'Reilly, 2015): "The ad, which featured a boy talking about all the life achievements he missed out on because he died in an accident, was an attempt to raise awareness about the fact that preventable childhood accidents are the leading cause of childhood death."

The multi-faced literature on the evolving role of brand communications includes such topics as: how online ads build brands (Hollis, 2005); brand positioning by search engine marketing (Dou, et al., 2010); social media and brand equity (Zailskaitė-Jakstė and Kuvykaite, 2013); branding and digital influencers (Uzunoglu and Kip, 2014); the damage from negative social media (Corstjens and Umblis, 2012); brand engagement (Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie, 2014); puffery in advertisements (Xu and Wyer Jr., 2010); and social brand planning (Stauffer, 2012).

Corporate Branding

Most companies, including virtually all business-to-business firms, emphasize their corporate names to convey overall brand positioning messages to various stakeholders. When stakeholders—including customers—are aware of the corporate brand and associate it with the individual products offered (and vice versa), the corporate (parent) image can positively or negatively affect these products, and even how firms' employees are perceived. Weidman, et al. (2013, p. 202) note that:

The heritage aspect of a [corporate] brand adds the association of depth, authenticity, and credibility in the tension between the past, present, and future. A company deeply rooted in tradition can use its long, rich heritage to stress its unambiguous identity, which is strongly connected with reputation and perceived image. The continuity with the past illustrates an effort to achieve trust and recognition as a heritage brand between the organization and its stakeholders. Longstanding corporate roots and values are the basis for creating new ideas.

According to Aaker (2004, p. p. 7):

As the brand that defines the organization that will deliver and stand behind the offering, the corporate brand is defined mostly by organizational associations. Organizational associations may be relevant to product brands, but the number, power, and credibility of organizational associations will be greater for a brand that visibly represents an organization. In particular, a corporate brand will potentially have a heritage, assets and capabilities, people, values and priorities, a local or global frame of reference, citizenship programs, and a performance record.

Here are examples that highlight the importance of corporate branding:

- A firm's perceived quality "is a critical asset contributing to its brand equity. In the U.S. vehicle market, we have seen Japanese and European vehicles have a higher resale value than similar U.S. cars. This is consistent with the strength of Japanese firms' [corporate] brand equity, despite the closing of the reliability gap." (Cole and Flynn, 2009, p. 89)
- As the world's leading fast-food chain, McDonald's has been criticized in traditional and new media for "unhealthy" food offerings. As the leader, McDonald's has become a flashpoint for protests, despite its addition of numerous healthy items. The corporate brand rubs off on all the items that the company markets. One academic article asked: "Can McDonald's Food Ever Be Considered Healthful?" (Lee and Savitt, 2009).
- In the telecom service industry, there are many corporate branding challenges. According to Dubey and George (2012, p. 65): "Airtel, India's leading telecom, has undergone massive rebranding to create a uniform global identity. The competitive challenges exacerbated the need for Airtel to fundamentally rethink its brand position. However, the immediate motivation for Airtel to rebrand itself was to reposition itself as a global telecom player after acquiring a number of overseas telecom companies."
- Starbucks has been a worldwide success able to charge premium prices for coffee and other food items. The firm has created a distinctive corporate brand that sets an umbrella image for the entire Starbucks' experience. As Seaford, Culp, and Brooks (2012, p. 43) report: "The goal was to target young and middle-aged professionals, particularly middle to high social classes. It created a clearly differentiated brand image that fostered a personal connection between customers and Starbucks. In so doing, Starbucks provided an inviting and refined place for these people to relax despite demanding schedules."
- Fast Retailing (FR) includes the UNIQLO, GU, and Theory retail chains. FR's corporate reputation is clear and has evolved: "In 1984, the [CEO] named the first store Unique Clothing Warehouse (later, UNIQLO) to clarify the store concept. In 1991, the name was changed to Fast Retailing because of a desire to act quicker. When FR went public, it set down 23 management principles, and emphasized customer orientation, flexibility, speed, a merit system, and corporate identity. In 2004, FR totally redefined its identity 'to create truly great clothing with new and unique value.'" (Huang, Kobayashi, and Isomura (2014).

Self-Branding

Each topic discussed thus far—evolution of branding concepts; brand positioning; generating brand equity/strength; role of communications, including new media; and corporate branding—has a significant effect on self-branding. Those concepts put self-branding in context.

Background

Self-branding reflects how we want to be perceived by employers, potential employers, peers, and others; it is a major key to long-term career success. Self-branding occurs when an individual develops and markets him- or herself in the same manner as a brand of a product would be marketed. A “product” is a bundle of attributes that are offered to a consumer. (Evans 2009).

A person must work hard to ensure that he/she is perceived as offering a combination of unique features (product differentiation) and that these features are desired by the target market (prospective employers), thus creating a unique selling proposition. When a job applicant is unknown, he/she must clearly communicate his/her attributes: What is her/his background? How does this person fulfill the requirements for a specific job? How is a person better than the competition (other job applicants)? When a job applicant is known in the marketplace, he/she must proactively reinforce a positive image and communicate why his/her career is still ascending. For a long-term executive in an industry, once marketplace perceptions are formed, they may be hard to alter. (Evans 2014b)

It must be recognized that self-branding by a single person takes many forms depending on the situation and the role being played. Although this article deals with professional self-branding, we also generate different self-brands in our roles as family member, friend, and so forth. The attributes that are necessary to be perceived as an excellent parent are quite distinct from those required to be perceived as an expert in one’s professional field. (Evans, 2014c)

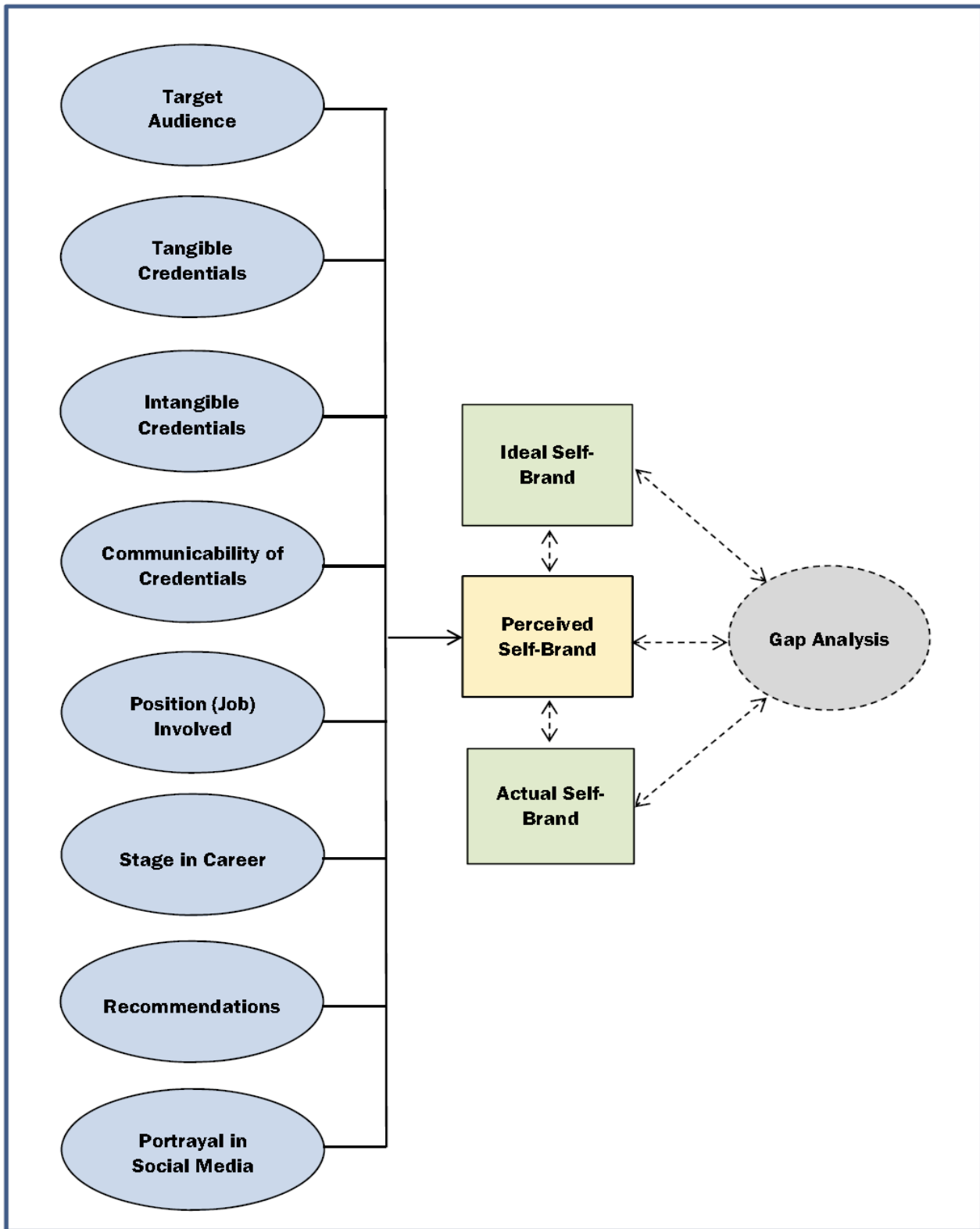
Why do so many people have trouble really understanding self-branding? There are several reasons: Self-reflection is something that we often do not do enough. We rarely recognize the importance of self-branding in our everyday lives. We don’t often ask ourselves: How do other people perceive me? Why? How does this compare to my concept of my self-brand? Many people are unable to articulate—even to themselves—what their self-brand is. People tend to have a tough time responding to this statement: “Tell me something about yourself.” First, this is situation specific. Second, in mentoring numerous people over the years, this author is still surprised by how many of them need time to this statement. (Evans, 2014c)

With regard to the topic of self-branding, there are not only excellent articles in the academic literature (such as Shepherd, 2005); the trade literature is also exceptionally strong. See, for example, Morgan (2011), Brown (2013), Dunnett (2014), Meadows and Buckley (2014), and Price (2014). A great trade resource is HubSpot’s 50-slide presentation on “How to Master Your Own Professional Brand.” It gives many tips, including those on building an online presence.

Figure 2 highlights a number of factors that impact on a person’s professional self-brand. On the left side of the figure are eight factors that affect a person’s perceived professional self-brand. Gap analysis involves the ideal self-brand, the perceived self-brand, and the actual self-brand. Please note: A person’s self-brand is not static, nor is the way others perceive us static. We need to proactively and regularly strive to enhance our self-brand.

As with any brand, perception of one’s self-brand is affected by the target audience engaged with that brand. It could be a present employer, a potential employer, colleagues, peers outside the firm, and so forth. Tangible credentials are objective, easily viewed accomplishments: education, years of experience, positions held, job responsibilities, professional memberships, and so forth. Intangible credentials are more subjective and sometimes more difficult to convey: the reputation of one’s employer(s), skills as a team leader, level of motivation, one’s contribution to the success of an employer, and so forth. The communicability of credentials encompasses two things: (1) Tangible credentials are easier to convey than intangible ones. (2) It is our responsibility to clearly and distinctively communicate our self-brand in every way and medium possible.

Figure 2: Selected Factors Impacting One's Professional Self-Brand



As a result of these eight factors, there are three perspectives for any self-brand: ideal self-brand, perceived self-brand, and actual self-brand. These concepts are illustrated through these questions: For a given position/career path, what are the ideal set of attributes sought by the employer? For a given position/career path, what is the perceived self-brand of each candidate by the employer? For a given position/career path, what is the actual set of attributes that you possess? With gap analysis, each person can determine the difference between the ideal self-brand sought, the perceived self-brand, and the actual self-brand. Then, a person should narrow these gaps—such as enrolling in a course to learn more about total quality marketing or better devising a social media profile.

The Steps in Self-Branding

Self-branding does not involve one step, a haphazard number of steps, or a one-time effort. Self-branding must be systematic, thorough, consistent across all communications media, and continuous. See, for example, Byrne and Gallagher (2015) and Paradiso (2015).

Figure 3 presents a detailed, systematic self-branding process that should be a major part of one's career planning—throughout the stages of one's career. At the center are the major steps to follow; to the left and right are suggestions related to self-branding during three specific steps in the process.

The first step in the self-branding process, sometimes overlooked, involves conducting a critical self-assessment. In a way, this is a personal SWOT (strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats) analysis. During this step, it is imperative that we be honest with ourselves! The subsequent steps should not be done until self-assessment is completed.

Table 1 consists of 31 of the most important questions to be addressed during our thorough self-assessment. EACH of these questions is essential; since people are sometimes impatient, there may be a tendency to skip or downplay some questions. Furthermore, self-assessment should be a regular activity, such as an annual self-audit. And it should be done at every stage of our career.

Next, there should be serious research on job trends occurring in the marketplace, as well as research on specific career paths. Such research can be a guide in choosing among specific jobs, job functions, career paths, the attributes that employers desire, and much more. According to research by the Institute for the Future (2011), these are ten of the skills that employers will most desire in 2020: sense making, social intelligence, novel and adaptive thinking, cross-cultural competency, computational thinking, new media literacy, transdisciplinary, design mindset, cognitive load management, and virtual collaboration. At this point, we are ready to determine current and future career goals.

The position (job) involved sets the expectation boundaries for the target audience(s). For instance, the expectations for a marketing analyst, a brand manager, and a chief marketing officer differ significantly—as do the perceived self-brands. The stage in the career affects the audience's perceived self-brand for us in a slightly different way. It is expected that we enhance the attributes associated with our self-brand as we move through career stages and that we “grow” over time. Recommendations from employers, colleagues, peers, and others affect our perceived self-brand. That is why recommendations at LinkedIn can be so valuable. Our portrayal in social media has two dimensions: (1) information that is controlled/provided by us and (2) information that is controlled/provided by others.

At the skill-building step, all of the previous steps are reviewed; and the person determines what specific strengths and weaknesses need to be enhanced. To do this, we need to realize what is required for specific career paths and to focus on our points of distinction.

Figure 3: Self-Branding and Career Planning (at any stage in one’s career)

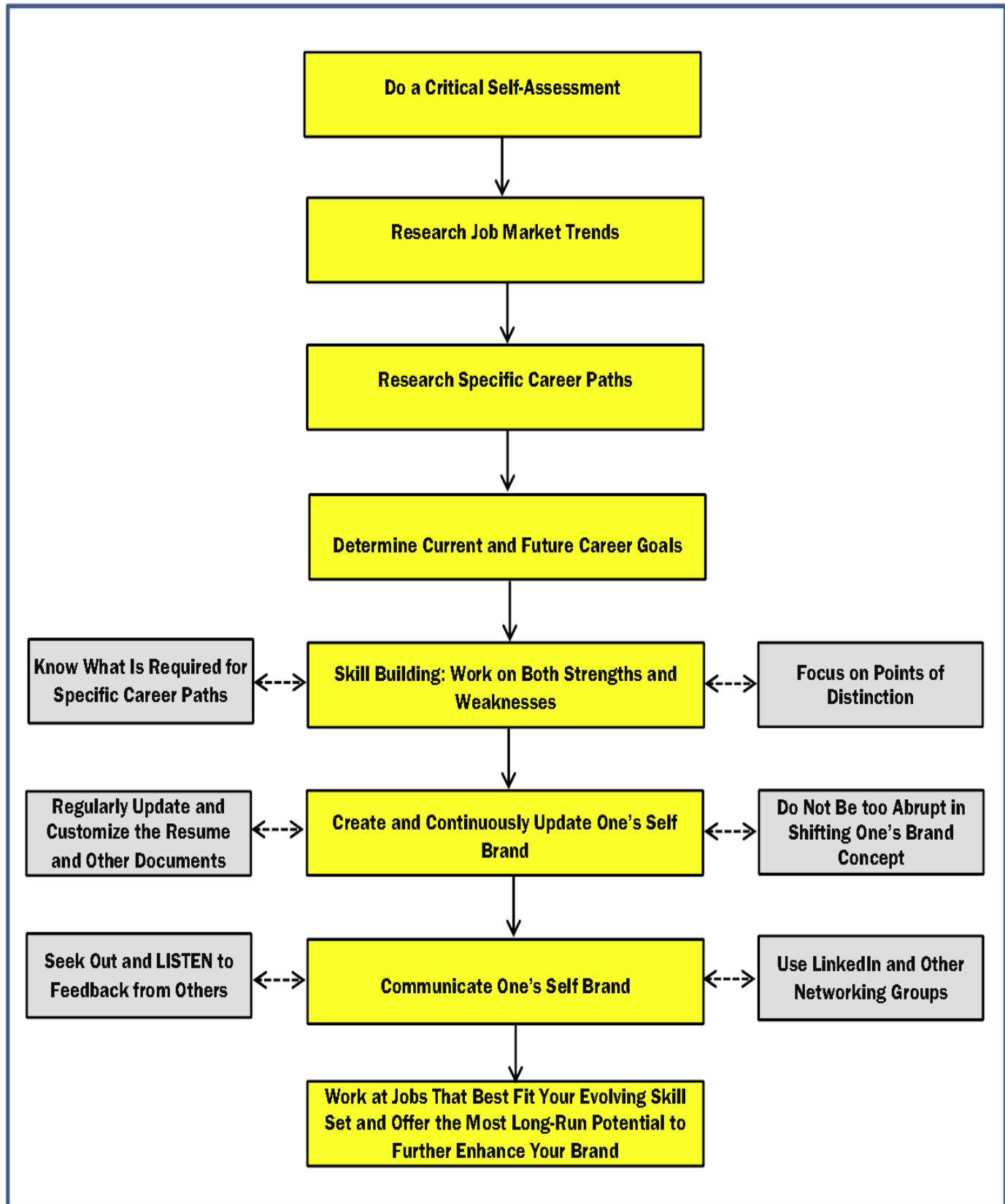


Table 1: A Personal Branding SWOT Analysis

1. In 15 words or less, what is my professional personal branding statement? Is this statement distinctive enough?
2. Is my professional self-brand positioning known and clear to others?
3. Do I recognize that my self-brand positioning must evolve as my career advances?
4. Do I recognize how tough it will be to re-position my self-brand once it is established?
5. What are my short-term career goals?
6. What are my long-term career goals?
7. What are my short- and long-term goals in terms of job advancement versus earnings?
8. How flexible am I in my career options?
9. What are my greatest strengths? How can I best capitalize on them?
10. What are my greatest weaknesses? How can I best address (minimize) on them – and perhaps even turn them into a strength?
11. Am I a self-starter or do I need a structured work environment?
12. What types of activities do I most like doing? (e.g., Working with people? With data? With technology?)
13. What types of activities do I least like doing? (e.g., Working with people? With data? With technology?)
14. Do I want a career that will constantly challenge me?
15. Do I have the potential to supervise people? The potential to lead a company?
16. How important is career success to me? Will my career be more important to me than anything else?
17. What kinds of jobs are expected to flourish over the next several years? What kinds face decreasing demand by employers over the next several years?
18. What industries and companies offer the best job opportunities over the next several years? The worst opportunities?
19. Would I rather work in a large or a small company?
20. Would I like to eventually work for myself?
21. Am I willing to relocate to get a good job?
22. In 10 years, would I be unhappy if I did not hold a top management position?
23. At each stage in my career, what would be my ideal job?
24. For what job am I currently best qualified? Am I the best candidate (person) for that job?
25. How do I become the best candidate (person) for that job?
26. In 15 words or less, what do I able will be my professional personal branding statement at the peak of my career? Is this statement distinctive enough?
27. Am I actively acquiring new skills to stay current and to be distinctive? What new skills should I be acquiring now?
28. Do I use social media to position my self brand to various constituencies?
29. Do I regularly “Google” myself to see what information is most readily available to others? What do I do to counteract negative information?
30. Do I regularly show my credentials and personal branding statement to peers for their insights and feedback? Do I follow their suggestions?
31. Do I follow the principles of integrated marketing communication (IMC) and present a consistent self-brand across all media platforms and in all professional situations?

Source: Very loosely adapted from Joel R. Evans. “The Self-Branding Process for Career Development,” *MBA Review*, Vol. 4 (December 2009), p. 24.

Now, we are ready to create and continuously update our self-brand. This requires regularly updating and customizing the resume and other documents, as well as not being too abrupt in shifting one's self-brand concept. This will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

In communicating one's self-brand, it is imperative that we seek out and listen to feedback from others and use LinkedIn and other networking groups.

What is the result of all of this planning and action? We should be able to "work at jobs that best fit your evolving skill set and offer the most long-run potential to further enhance your brand." For people to see if they are on the right track, they should take Bence's (2008) personal branding quiz.

Differentiation/Positioning

As with corporate and product brands, the key to successful self-branding is to create and maintain a distinctive, believable, and desirable brand position from others in the career/job marketplace. Consider these observations by Arruda (2003, p. 58):

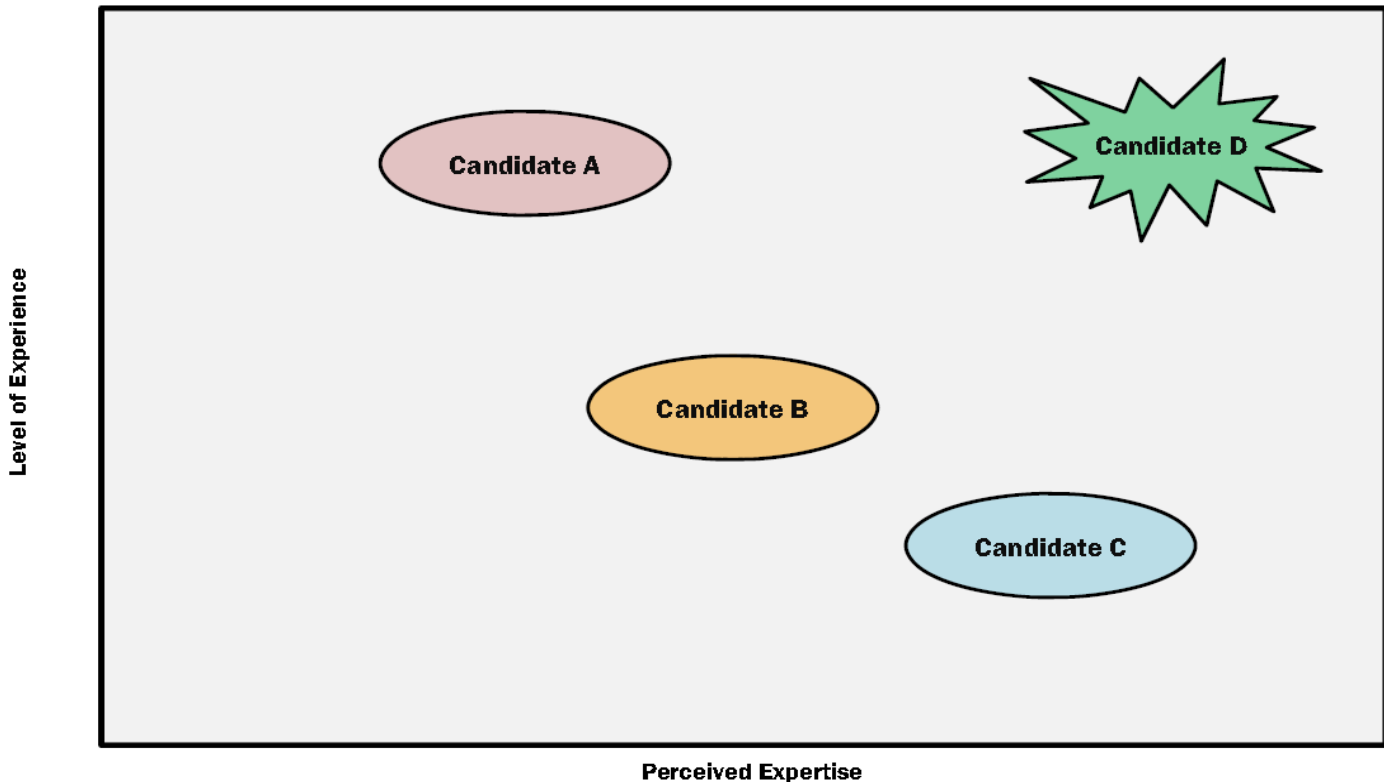
Businesses are in a constant state of [flux] in response to the changing demands of the market. Like a corporation, you need to differentiate yourself and build demand in your target markets. Personal branding is about understanding your unique combination of attributes—strengths, skills, values, and passions—and using those to differentiate yourself and guide your career decisions. Whether you're a senior executive, the president of your own company, or a worker at a small organization, managing your brand is critical to achieving your professional goals.

The vocabulary that is used in self-branding is quite important in differentiating/positioning a self-brand. For example, Ulrich and Smallwood (2007) identify more than 110 positive attributes that can be used as self-descriptors, ranging from accepting to determined to insightful to quality-oriented to values-driven. In contrast, Haden (2014) cites 32 words that are often used incorrectly, which does not reflect well on us. These include affect and effect, compliment and complement, principal and principle, it's and its, and you're and your.

The focus of one's self-branding also needs to be extremely clear. For example, you can brand yourself as an "eminent marketing scholar," a topic studied by Noble, Bentley, Campbell, and Singh (2010, p. 324):

Are so-called "A"-level publications all that matter? The results here show powerfully that the common mantra to focus primarily on top-tier publications in the development of one's career is well-founded. Top tier or "A"-level publications were not only significantly correlated with eminence but, when treated as a control variable, they removed most of the other significant individual influences considered. These effects of top tier publications on eminence were persistent even when controlling for the total number of publications.

Figure 4 shows an illustrative self-brand positioning map. It is based on just two criteria: level of experience and perceived expertise. In this instance, Candidate D is the obvious choice.

Figure 4: Illustrative Self-Brand Positioning Map

Mastering Self-Branding

How does one become a real master at self-branding? Bence (2015, pp. 13) has an interesting take on this subject:

What do Sir Richard Branson, Barack Obama, and Suze Orman [a personal finance expert] all have in common? They have each built powerful personal brands that have propelled them to the top of their businesses, their careers, and their lives. How did they do it? Like other successful personal branders, they took the time to define, communicate, and protect their brands. You can be sure they followed all of the top 10 secrets [in this article] to reach their great success. There's no magic to it: You can apply the same personal branding principles to your work and life not only to achieve your goals, but to surpass them."

Here are Bence's (2015, pp. 13-14) top five secrets: (1) "You already have a personal brand whether you want one or not—simply by virtue of being you in the workplace. It's up to you to determine where your personal brand is strong and where it could use improvement." (2) "It's critical to keep in mind that your personal brand is not what you think it is but it is what others perceive it to be." (3) "A common misconception about personal branding is that it's self-centered and all about you. Yet, personal branding is about your audience." (4) "If there is a gap between what your audience thinks and feels about you and what you want them to think and feel about you, your personal brand should be adjusted and strengthened." (5) "Many people believe personal branding is all about how you 'execute' your brand, but true personal branding starts with a clear definition."

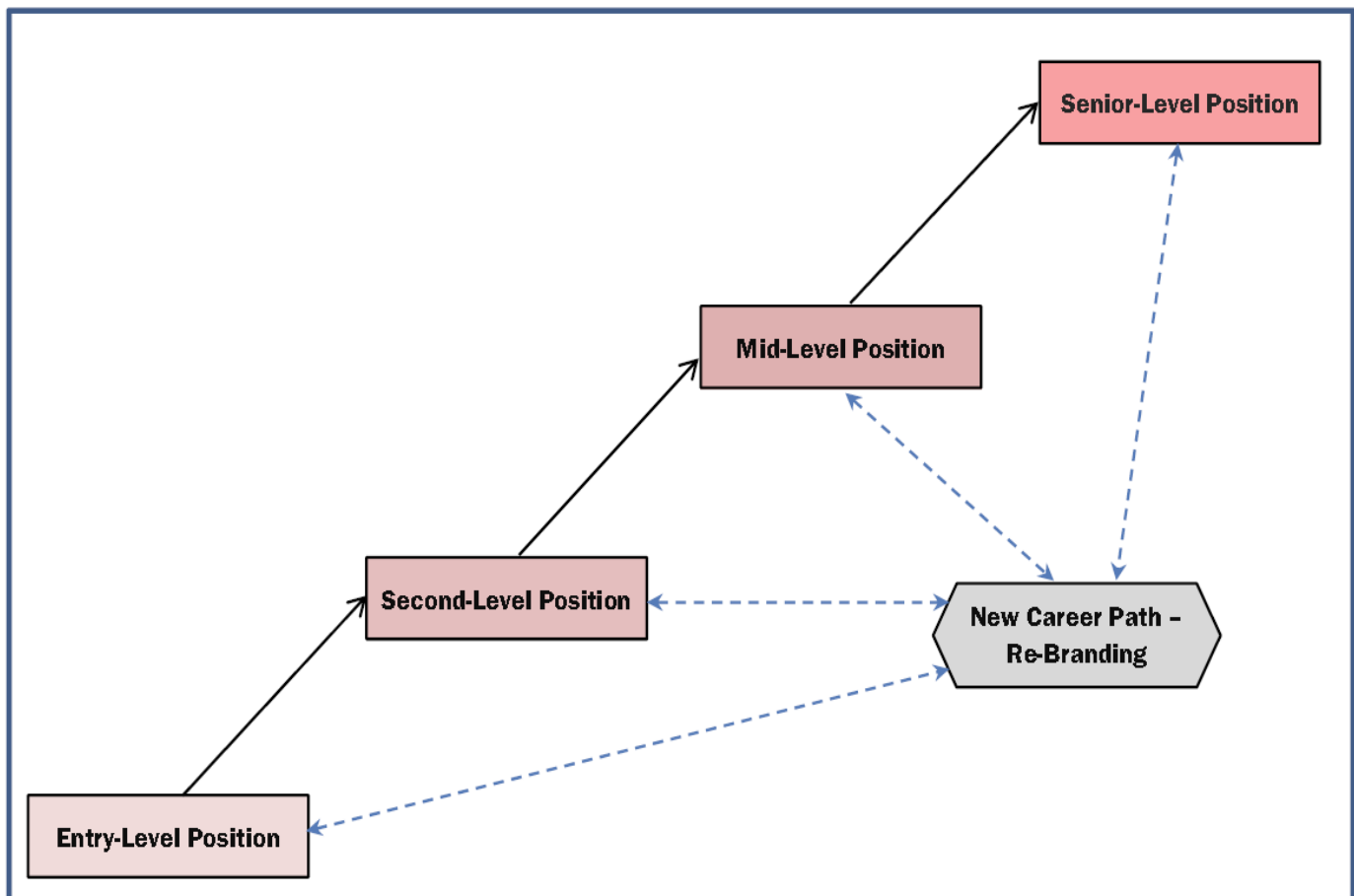
Self-Brand Management and Re-Invention

Let us examine two aspects of self-branding: how one's self-brand changes as he or she moves through a career and re-inventing/re-branding ourselves. Figure 5 highlights both notions.

Each year, the Career Advisory Board conducts a "Job Preparedness Indicator Study." Included is a look at what employers expect of employees at different stages of their careers. For its latest report, Career Advisory Board (2014) found the following:

- Employers of entry-level candidates—"Managers hiring recent college graduates rated high integrity, a strong work ethic, accountability, self-motivation, and strong basic interpersonal ability as the most critical attributes for successful candidates. Tangible skills like technology, decision-making, presentation, and risk-taking skills are not essential.
- Employers of mid-level candidates: "Manager respondents ranked many skills with about the same level of importance as at the entry-level. The most important skills were slightly more common at the mid-level than the entry-level, though the most critical skills and attributes of high integrity and accountability were still not considered 'very common' among mid-level job seekers. At the mid-level, the most significant gap between what hiring managers need and what candidates are delivering is again seen in the area of written communication."

Figure 5: An Illustration of a Career Ladder Approach to Self-Branding



- Employers of senior-level candidates: “Most skills increased in importance and commonality. More is expected, but candidates also bring more to the table. The exceptions, or where we see the widest gaps, are in skills and attributes of high integrity, adaptability, and strategic perspective. Similarly to last year, we see more gaps at the senior-level than any other level.”

Re-inventing/re-branding may be needed at any point, based on a job ceiling, boredom, a dislike of job functions, or other personal factors. It may also be needed if a person is dismissed from a job or does something to harm his/her reputation (see Brown, 2011). Re-positioning may mean a step back in one’s career ladder or a lateral move at lower compensation. Other times, especially if a person has been enhancing his or her skill set in a new direction, better opportunities may arise.

Clark (2011, p. 79) sums up personal re-branding quite well:

People re-invent themselves to take on a new challenge, shift into more-meaningful work, or rebut perceptions hindering career progress. Some changes are major (a financial services manager moves into retail). Some re-branding is subtle, as for an executive who wants to advance but needs to overcome the knock that he’s “not good with numbers.” Taking control of your personal brand may mean the difference between an unfulfilling job and a rewarding career. As Longfellow noted, “We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done.” Your path may make perfect sense to you, but how can you persuade others to embrace your new brand—and take you seriously?

Creating and Sustaining an Online Self-Brand

As noted earlier, an online self-brand persona is affected by both content that we control and content about us (or our employer) that is uploaded by others. To monitor external content, a Google search of ourselves should be a regular occurrence. When we see negative content, we should put out positive information of our own and comment constructively at other sites, if such comments are allowed. This will reduce—but not eliminate—the effects of negative content.

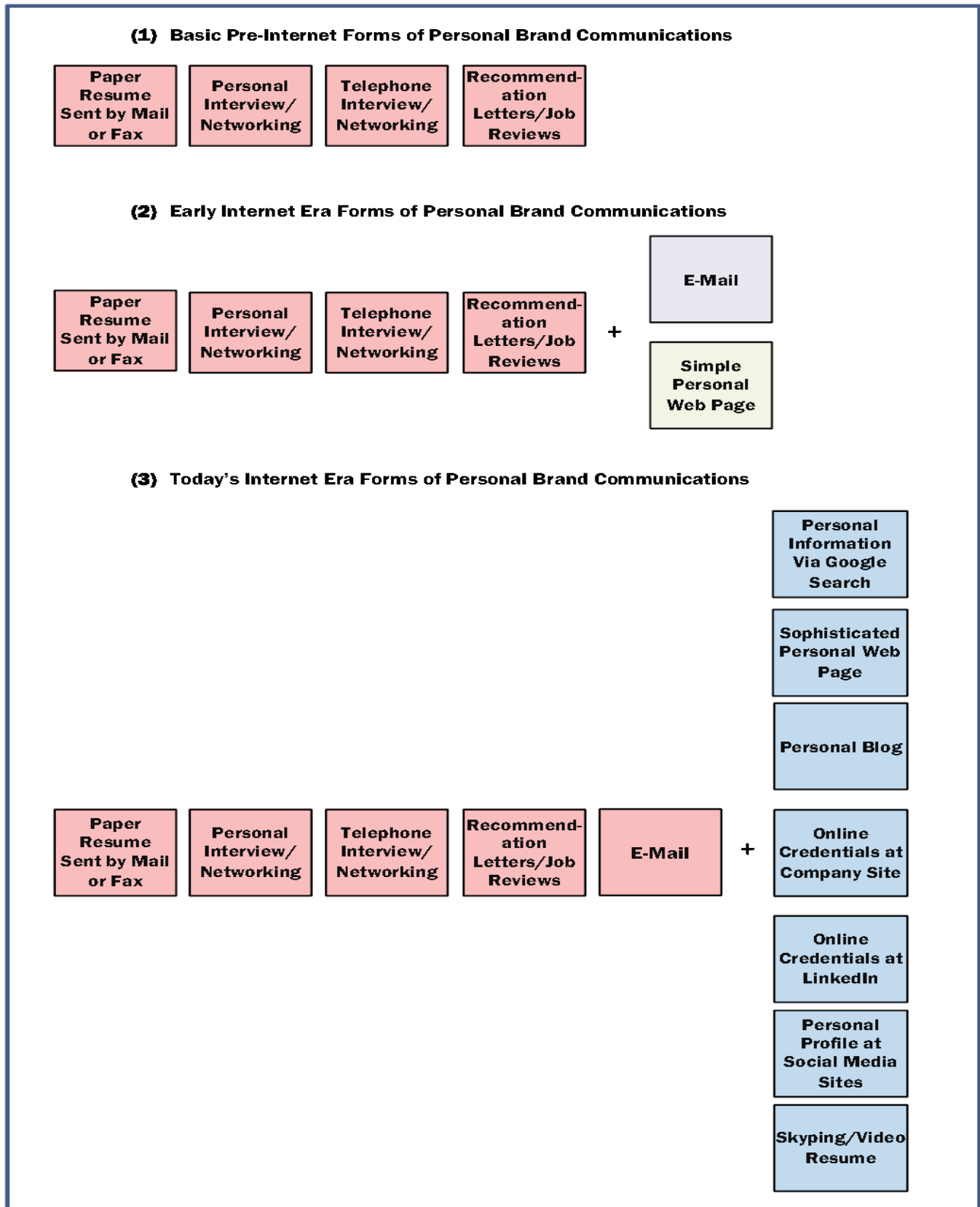
As marketing professionals involved with our own self-branding, we must be able to more than satisfactorily answer this question: “What’s Your Personal Social Media Strategy?” Certainly, we need such a strategy (Dutta, 2010, p. 128):

Leaders must embrace social media. First, they provide a low-cost platform on which to build a personal brand, communicating within and outside your company. Second, they let you engage rapidly and simultaneously with peers, employees, customers, and the public, especially younger people, in the same transparent and direct way they expect from everyone in their lives. Third, they give you an opportunity to learn from instant information and unvarnished feedback. Active participation in social media can be the difference between leading effectively and ineffectively, and between advancing and faltering in pursuit of goals. You can be proactive or reactive.

There is a growing literature regarding online self-branding. Here is a cross-section: Sepp, Liljander, and Gummerus (2011); Chung and Ahn (2013); Waldman (2013b); Poeppelman and Blacksmith (2014); Edmiston (2014); Scott, Sinclair, Short, and Bruce (2014); and Shane (2015).

Figure 6 shows how self-branding communications have dramatically changed through three phases over the years—from pre-Internet to early Internet to today’s Internet.

Figure 6: How Communicating a Personal Brand Has Changed Over the Years (selected examples)



Examples of Self-Branding

Let us conclude our discussion of self-branding with some specific real examples:

- “As a high-profile, global business leader, he’s energetic, upbeat, and has a can-do attitude. He’s highly entrepreneurial yet dedicates much of his time, energy, and capital to social, educational, and environmental causes. He’s adventurous and not afraid to push the boundaries of what’s possible in both the physical and business worlds. He utilizes social media to its fullest, and he prides himself on being accessible. Who is he?” Answer: Sir Richard Branson. (Arms, 2014, p. 41)
- “Despite what some people may think, personal branding is NOT the same as being the center of attention or creating a cult of your own personality. A good brand is quite the opposite. Let me explain: Think about Steve Jobs. What emotions come to your head... I think: ‘innovative,’ ‘polished,’ and ‘underdog power.’ On the other hand, think about Paris Hilton. What emotions come to your head... I think: ‘conceited,’ ‘spoiled,’ and ‘lost at sea.’” (Waldman, 2013a)
- “Nick Goss had an identity, but it wasn’t positive. ‘I was the annoying Englishman who says, This isn’t going to work.’ Goss started as a strategist at BMC Software. At meetings, he realized his opinions were ignored or greeted skeptically: ‘The questioning got into incredible minutiae,’ he recalls. In a talk with a senior VP, he confirmed that his brand, which he thought was ‘clever and good at coming up with novel solutions,’ wasn’t selling. ‘They didn’t see me as someone who was experienced at what they do, so I didn’t have high credibility with them.’ After that conversation, and others like it, Goss became less theoretical and more helpful.” (Hyatt, 2010)
- With regard to Martha Stewart, Murphy (2010) examined media coverage of her from 1982 to 2007. She (p. 229) found that: “Looking at Stewart’s news releases during the 25 years, they reflected progressive efforts to support her ambitions in the housewares market. Early ones stressed mass tastefulness and lifestyle authority themes to bolster her credibility as a domestic expert; later ones emphasized her acumen as head of a major media company. They focused on business successes and ventures into furniture and home design, as well as association with chains like Macy’s. In the middle of the time period—from the ImClone investigation of June 2002 until Stewart entered prison in October 2004—themes of scandal and corporate survival prevailed, with public relations efforts focused on holding Omnimedia together by reassuring partners, shareholders, and customers that the company was financially solid and its founder innocent. Last in time came the theme of back to fundamentals. This factor appears to reflect a strategic effort to restore Stewart’s original reputation as an approachable domestic authority, and to regain continuity between the post-prison Stewart and the early, better-liked Stewart.”
- Consider Michael Milken’s personal brand redemption, as related by Clark (2011): Milken “was once best known as a 1980s financier jailed for securities violations.” He then “dramatically redeemed his reputation by more than three decades of committed philanthropy. He has raised hundreds of millions of dollars to combat prostate cancer, melanoma, epilepsy, and more.” A *Fortune* cover story was titled “The Man Who Changed Medicine.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although the emphasis of this paper is self-branding, it has been imperative for us to place this concept within the broader constructs of “branding.” Without grasping the fundamentals, complexities, and evolving nature of branding, we cannot properly develop, maintain, and grow our own self-brand. We have had three goals in this paper.

One: To present an in-depth discussion of the evolution of branding, brand positioning, brand equity, the role of communications (including social media), and corporate branding. These are crucial underpinnings for self-branding. In too many cases, the existing literature has presented self-branding as a discrete topic rather than as a type of branding that shares many of the same considerations and perceptions as other brands.

Two: To define and describe self-branding and the self-branding process in a systematic, prescriptive manner. As noted previously: “Self-branding reflects how we want to be perceived by employers, potential employers, peers, and others; and it is a major key to long-term career success. Self-branding occurs when an individual develops and markets him- or herself in the same manner as a brand of a product would be marketed.”

In our analysis of self-branding, we covered such topics as these: why self-branding and self-branding are hard for some people, factors impacting on one’s professional self-brand, steps in self-branding—an honest self-assessment (a personal SWOT analysis), how one’s self-brand can be differentiated/positioned, ways to master to one’s self-brand, managing and re-inventing (when necessary) one’s self-brand, and the online self-brand. Original figures/flowcharts on self-branding have been introduced. Several specific examples of self-branding, both good and bad, are included.

Three: To present an extensive literature review related to branding and self-branding. This literature review includes 125 sources. Importantly, both the academic literature and the trade literature are incorporated. Although academics are typically aware of research in scholarly journals, in the case of self-branding, there is a lot to be learned from trade articles.

As to recommendations, two main ones are offered: First, in developing and managing one’s self-brand, a person should be cognizant of and apply the broader brand concepts we have noted. Second, self-branding must be done in an honest, reflective, process-driven, and continuous way; as with other brands, professional self-brands must evolve as a person moves through his or her career.

Let us end with these observations/recommendations across centuries about personal reputations as cited at Brainy Quote. They are certainly food for thought and put things in perspective:

- “The way to gain a good reputation is to endeavor to be what you desire to appear.” (Socrates)
- “You can’t build a reputation on what you are going to do.” (Henry Ford)
- “Associate with men [women] of good quality if you esteem your own reputation; for it is better to be alone than in bad company.” (George Washington)
- “A brand for a company is like a reputation for a person. You earn a reputation by trying to do hard things well.” (Jeff Bezos)
- “It pays to be obvious, especially if you have a reputation for subtlety.” (Isaac Asimov)
- “I know I have a reputation that is not so flattering, but I guess I owe it to just being a private person. I don’t mean anyone harm, and I’m not being mean. I just don’t socialize much; I don’t party too much. I don’t know what to say to the media if I’m not talking about a film that I am doing, so yeah, maybe I am perceived as a snob.” (Shahid Kapoor, an Indian actor)
- “Reputation is an idle and most false imposition; oft got without merit, and lost without deserving.” (William Shakespeare)
- Similar thoughts about how easy it is to ruin one’s self-brand—“It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it.” (Benjamin Franklin) “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.” (Warren Buffett)

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