



# Branding Sets Mavericks Apart From the Heard

By Laura Patterson, President, VisionEdge Marketing, Inc.

To cattle ranchers in the Old West, branding their cattle was one of the most important chores they had when raising a herd. Cattle was wealth and branding showed ownership, increasing the value of the rancher.

Mavericks, or non-branded cattle, were liabilities -- they could cost the owner money, and worse yet, the owner actually could lose "market share" to other ranchers who might claim the unbranded cattle as their own.

Today's competitive business environment is no different, except that instead of branding cattle, you should brand yourself.

In this highly competitive world, a new breed of worker is emerging. With the employment uncertainty in this economy, a growing number of people are defining their own jobs, creating their own projects and acting as entrepreneurs. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 16.7 million Americans work in non-traditional work environments. These folks are the new mavericks -- defined as someone who exhibits great independence in thought and action.

Like the cowboys of the Old West, mavericks know that to thrive, either in a traditional or non-traditional work environment, they must have a clear understanding of their value and promise -- their personal brand -- and be able to communicate this personal brand to others. Understanding, controlling and managing their personal brand gives them a competitive advantage.

The notion of a brand isn't new. Companies have been branding themselves and their products and services for years. Essentially, a brand stands for a singular idea or concept that a company or product "owns" inside the mind of a customer or prospect. Although a company or product brand is an intangible asset, it contributes to the expectations and worth that customers place on the company or product.

For people, brands are important because they represent their unique blend of talents, strengths, skills and knowledge, giving them an advantage in a competitive market. Similar to a product brand, a personal brand is a distinctive identity that allows any person to stand out from the crowd and carries his or her guarantee or promise.

A personal brand helps distinguish a person from competitors and helps determine which opportunities best fit into long-term goals and life plans. For example, when people think of the Lone Ranger, they think of a mask, silver bullets and fighting the bad guys. In today's work environment, you might know people who have branded themselves as problem-solvers or key information providers. These people have learned how to create personal brands and turn them into a life asset.

The personal branding process begins much like the product branding process. The first step is to take stock of attributes and assess how they can provide benefits to others. This means a person must know the needs, wants and challenges of target markets for the sake of positioning.

Some questions in the self-assessment process include:

- What are my key strengths?
- What is my target market?
- What is the value created for potential customers of my brand?

Only after you have a clear understanding of your personal brand can you begin to proactively market yourself by communicating your talents and how they can add value.

The second step is to create a 30-second statement to communicate to others your brand's promise and where you fit into the market. To help construct this brand statement, follow this process, known as the "Value Pyramid":

- List the most important characteristics of your personality, education, experience and cultural background. These are your "features."
- Next, list the benefits to your employer, client and others that these features provide.
- Taking the process further, write down rewards that occur as a result of the benefits.
- Select one idea that best encapsulates your value.
- Lastly, in a few sentences, write your brand statement, using the "Value Pyramid" as your guide.

This statement should emphasize the unique value you provide, rather than what you do. For a maverick in the Old West, it might be something like, "I'm known as the most dependable trail boss this side of the Pecos. I've been working cattle since I was knee high to a horse and know the Chisholm Trail like the back of my hand. I've driven cattle to Dodge City more than a half a dozen times and have yet to lose one steer."

Whether a free agent or seeking traditional employment, people need to be their own brand managers and not automatically assume others know the value they can provide.

The final step for creating a personal brand is testing, which can be done through networking events. In the Old West, the primary place to network was a card game at

the local saloon. Today, networking is best conducted through industry, trade and professional organizations. These are great places for testing of a personal brand.

First, by meeting and talking with members of these organizations, you can research the challenges of the target market. Second, networking events are a great place to test a 30-second statement to see whether it resonates with the target market. Upon a successful test within a smaller environment, you then can roll out the personal brand to a larger target market, employing every strategy and tactic that demonstrates your value.

In the Old West, mavericks carried six-shooters. Today, they carry mobile phones and laptop computers. However, both then and now, mavericks understand they are in charge of their own destinies in a competitive environment.

Mavericks know that by creating and marketing their personal brands, they hold a unique advantage over their competitors.

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