



Personal Branding – It’s What Sets A Maverick Apart From The Herd

Using a Personal Brand to Create a Competitive Advantage

By Laura Patterson

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 could actually 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, one should brand his/herself. In this highly competitive, fast changing 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, they 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 their customers and prospects. While a company or product brand is actually an intangible asset, it contributes to the value creation, or the expectations and worth that customers place on the company or product.

For people, a brand is also important because it is their unique blend of talents, strengths, skills and knowledge, which gives them an advantage in a competitive market. Similar to a product brand, a personal brand is a distinctive identity that allows any individual to stand out from the crowd and carries his/her guarantee or promise. A personal brand helps distinguish you from competition and helps determine which opportunities best fit into your long-term goals and life plans. For example, when you think of the Lone Ranger, you think of a mask, silver bullets and fighting the bad guys – that is his brand. In today's work environment, you may know someone who has branded his or herself as a heavy-lifting problem solver, or someone who is the go-to-person for key information. These people have learned how to create a personal brand and turn it into a life asset.

The personal branding process begins very much like the product branding process. The first step is to take stock of your attributes and assess how these attributes can provide benefit to others. This means you must know the needs, wants and challenges of your target market, so you can position yourself as the best solution. Some questions to ask that may help in your self-assessment process include:

- What are my key strengths?
- Who 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 promise and where you fit into the market. To help construct this brand statement, follow this process which we call 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, etc.) 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, you need to be you own brand manager and not automatically assume that others know the value you 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 to test your 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 your 30-second statement to see if your personal brand resonates with the target market. Upon a successful test within a smaller environment, you can then rollout your personal brand to the larger target market, employing every strategy and tactic that demonstrates your value.

In the old west, mavericks carried six-shooters. Today, they carry cell phone and laptops. However, both then and now, mavericks understand that they are in charge of their own destiny in a competitive

environment. Mavericks know that by creating and marketing their personal brand, they have a unique advantage over their competition.

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