



Time to Take 'Brand Me' Seriously

Executives need to work harder at building up a strong personal brand or risk stalling their career by becoming stereotyped. Criticaleye finds out how 'brand me' can be cultivated

The notion of 'brand me' is growing in importance. If you're not taking control and giving serious thought to your own profile, values and reputation, you can guarantee somebody else will, especially in the age of social media. So while it's a term that may cause raised eyebrows from grizzled executives, the time has come to take ownership of your personal brand.

Gary Kildare, Chief HR Officer for Global Technology Services at IBM, says: "The starting point is to be clear about what your brand or professional identity is and then to ensure that what you do is aligned and consistent with it. So have a

plan and manage it – don't just approach it randomly or go with the flow."

It's an idea that permeates many areas, be it through face-to-face networking and the story you tell about your passions and aspirations, to the use of social and more traditional media channels to relay views and opinions.

Yetunde Hofmann, former Global HR Director at Imperial Tobacco, says that it's about "keeping personal integrity in everything that you do, as you move through different jobs", so you're relaying clear and consistent values by what you say and the decisions you make.

By its very nature, the endgame will vary from person to person. Some will simply be seeking to raise their profile by aligning with issues they're passionate about, while others may be specifically looking for a career change. The key is to be true to yourself as it's all too easy to be exposed if your motives are less than genuine.

For **Phil Smith**, Chief Executive for the UK and Ireland at Cisco Systems, there is a danger that the concept of personal brand can be somewhat arch, in the sense of people "artificially trying to create a persona which is not necessarily all them". ▶

He explains: “Part of it is being exactly as it says on the tin. To be clear and consistent in what you do; to take the same approach when you do things, not to change specifically for an occasion or an event or an engagement, because people usually see through you reasonably quickly if you’re falsifying your persona in some way.”

If done in the right spirit, you can start to differentiate yourself. **Laura Haynes**, Chairman of brand consultancy Appetite, says: “One of the things that I rail against is how people have become so careful and so considered in the way in which they talk about things, and have moved away from speaking in real language into an MBA [style of] language.

“I jokingly talk about how I teach a course in how to unlearn your MBA and learn to speak English again, because I think that if we all follow prepared ways of speaking and use words that are really there to cover up or disguise meaning, then, actually, we’re not telling people who we are or what we’re about.”

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

Getting stereotyped can be a real career killer, but when looking to build your profile and differentiate yourself, it is important not to rush things. **Dominic Emery**, Vice President for Long-Term Planning at BP, says that you should “try to be clear and define what you stand for, particularly where your interests lie”.

Using social media remains a risky endeavour for many executives. **Gary** says: “The ‘net native’ generation is clearly faster at figuring out how to navigate the social media age – for the rest of us, we need to learn some new skills and get

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interested and engaged in it; you won’t and can’t avoid it... From a business perspective, the main thing to bear in mind is that with greater transparency – nothing is ‘off the record’.”

It’s about understanding the new mediums and how to use them to get your message across. **David Clarke**, Chief Executive of the BCS, a trade body for the IT industry, says: “Whether it’s a TV interview or a radio interview, you have to have soundbites and a whole series of things that people can catch on to. So the way you say things and the whole style has certainly moved into a different era... Now you have to be much punchier.”

Phil says: “You can have a dialogue with people in a much greater way in the social media world. Obviously, by contrast, the opposite side of that is that it’s easy to say something and screw it up because you’ve not really thought it through properly.”

“But, again, if that’s something you’re doing with honesty and integrity, you can usually find that has maybe slightly less impact; it depends what you say. Assuming you don’t actually say anything ridiculously outrageous or even controversial – in a criminal or negative way – most people are

accepting of the fact that social media is more personal.”

The notion of ‘personal brand’ can take on added significance if you find yourself ‘between roles’. That’s when the penny drops for many people, as they’ve allowed themselves to be defined and shaped by an organisation that no longer requires their services.

For those who have taken the time to build a strong profile, it’s less daunting to begin promoting yourself in that bid to find another role. In fact, just simply looking ahead and planning where you want to be in the next five to ten years, whether that’s an executive or non-executive director role, will be a whole lot easier if you start early and get your ‘brand’ out there. ■

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