

Reinventing Your Personal Brand

by Dorie Clark

FROM THE MARCH 2011 ISSUE



ARTWORK: LEANDRO ERLICH, **LE CABINET DU PSY**, 2005, FURNISHINGS (COUCH, BOOKSHELF, DESK, SEATS), GLASS, FLUORESCENT LIGHTS, INSTALLATION AT NOGUERAS GALLERY/BLANCHARD, BARCELONA

You've worked long and hard, sacrificing to build a solid reputation. When you're out of the room, you know what they're saying: He's an innovative marketer. She's a terrific patent lawyer. He knows everything about the Latvian export market. But what if you now want to rebrand yourself?

People reinvent themselves all the time—to take on a new challenge, shift into more-meaningful work, or rebut perceptions that have hindered their career progress. Sometimes the changes are major (a financial services manager moves into retail, a venture capitalist becomes a life coach). Sometimes the rebranding 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?

These days, I consult on strategy and marketing for *Fortune* 500 companies, major nonprofits, and government agencies. But I have also been a journalist, a political operative, a nonprofit executive director, and a documentary filmmaker—and I studied theology at Harvard along the way. In addition to doing my own rebranding, I've advised scores of executives who were looking for a new direction. I've learned that five steps are key to reinventing yourself for the business marketplace, whether your desired changes are large or small.

1. Define Your Destination

Rebranding isn't easy, and if your plan is poorly thought out, you'll end up confusing yourself and others. Start by determining where you really want to invest your energy. Check out relevant industry trade journals, do informational interviews, even try some internships. (They're not just for college students anymore; VocationVacations, for instance, enables people to apprentice with professionals, ranging from schooner captains to alpaca ranchers to brewmasters.) If you're looking to advance or shift laterally within your company, see if a shadow program or a sabbatical is available—and seek out a mentor who can guide you.

Next you need to build the skills necessary for your new path. If you've been a game developer for the past decade, you may understand the technology better than anyone else in the company. But if you want to move into video game marketing, technical savvy isn't enough; ask yourself what else you need to know—and how to learn it. For Heather, a nonprofit manager who decided to make a new career of her interest in transportation engineering, that meant returning to school for a doctorate and developing her expertise early on as a faculty research assistant. Learning the skills you need will give you the confidence to start publicizing your new identity—and the credibility required to assume it.

2. Leverage Your Points of Difference

What's your unique selling proposition? That's what people will remember, and you can use it to your advantage. After losing popularity to newer, even more right-wing talking heads, the conservative pundit Ann Coulter had to reinvent herself. She didn't entirely abandon her old brand; she reconfigured it to compete in a new marketplace. Leveraging her unique blend of blonde vixen and conservative firebrand, Coulter is now courting gay Republicans who enjoy diva-style smack talk.

As Coulter understood, previous experience can distinctively color your new brand and help you stand out. Heather, the former nonprofit manager, says, "I tried to offer the value-added of having a different perspective." She'd say to her new engineering colleagues, "You know how to build roads. But I worked in the community where you're building the road, and here's how it impacts people." Heather says, "That was my foot in the door."

Finally, use distinguishing characteristics to your advantage, even if they're not strictly relevant to your work. Robert Reich, the former U.S. secretary of labor and my previous employer (I headed up communications when he ran for Massachusetts governor), is under five feet tall. He knew that people seeing him for the first time would be surprised—and he didn't want his height to be a distraction. So he'd loosen up crowds with a joke or two about his stature and, in the same vein, titled his campaign book *I'll Be Short*. Like it or not, "short" was part of his brand—and he shrewdly leveraged it.

3. Develop a Narrative

You used to write award-winning business columns...and now you want to review restaurants? It's human nature to have many interests, to seek new experiences, and to want to develop new skills. Unfortunately, however, people often view that as the sign of a dilettante. It's unfair, but to protect your personal brand, you need to develop a coherent narrative that explains exactly how your past fits into your present. "I used to write about the business side of many industries, including food and wine," you might say. "I realized that my big-picture knowledge of agricultural trends and business finance uniquely positioned me to cover restaurants with a different perspective." It's like a job interview: You're turning what could be perceived as a weakness ("He doesn't know

anything about food, because he’s been a business reporter for 20 years”) into a compelling strength that people will remember (“He’s got a different take on the food industry, because he has knowledge most other people don’t”).

The key is not to explain your transition in terms of your own interests (“I was bored with my job and decided to try something else,” or “I’m on a personal journey to find the real me”) but to focus on the value your prior experience brings. This is particularly relevant for the fresh-out-of-college set, whose early career opportunities have been hobbled by the recession. A stint flipping burgers may not be the ideal résumé builder, but you can get credit for learning valuable skills on the front line of a customer service organization—if you tell your story well.

One caveat is that your narrative must be consistent with your past. Politicians are pilloried for obvious, poll-driven personality changes. (Witness Al Gore’s unsuccessful reinvention of himself during the 2000 presidential campaign from eco-wonk to podium-banging “people versus the powerful” crusader for the proletariat.) You, too, will be called out fast if you’re seen as abandoning your roots, shading the truth, or not acknowledging your history. It was big news last year when Alex Bogusky, the hipster impresario of Crispin Porter + Bogusky—an ad agency famed for its work on behalf of corporate clients such as Burger King and Coke—left advertising to champion environmental causes and run a center for activists in Boulder, Colorado. His socially conscious rebranding was directly challenged in a Fast Company profile that quoted a number of former staffers deriding his purportedly abrasive management style. Successful rebranding doesn’t involve inventing a new persona—it’s a shift in emphasis that should prompt others to say, “I can see you doing that.”

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4. Reintroduce Yourself

Once you've embraced your rebrand, making new contacts is the easy part—they'll take the new you at face value. The harder slog is reintroducing yourself to your existing network.

The truth is, the vast majority of people aren't paying much attention to you. That means their perceptions are probably a few years out of date—and it's not their fault. With hundreds (or thousands) of Facebook friends and vague social connections, we can't expect everyone to remember the details of our lives. So we have to strategically reeducate our friends and acquaintances—because they're going to be our buyers, recommenders, or leads for new jobs.

First make sure that all your contact points (Facebook, LinkedIn, personal website, and so forth) are consistent and up-to-date. Jason, an IT contractor from New York City, had a successful business doing hands-on database administration. When he sought to rebrand himself as an IT strategy consultant, he rolled out a new website and e-newsletter to ensure that he was sending clients and colleagues the right message. Don't forget to reach out by phone or e-mail to all the people on your list—individually—to let them know about your new direction and, where appropriate, to ask for help, advice, or business. (Blast e-mails are a start, but they too often go unread.)

In some cases your reintroduction may also involve addressing negative perceptions—and being disciplined about sticking to new behavior that better reflects your aspirations. Before his U.S. Senate victory, Al Franken was known for fiercely partisan political comedy (including his book *Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot*) and theatrics like screaming matches with Bill O'Reilly. But on the campaign trail and in office Franken has used only the gentlest humor, made an effort to forge bipartisan relationships, and focused on serious policy issues, garnering several early legislative successes.

Also think strategically about your “unveiling.” Are there projects you can get involved with that will showcase your new interests and abilities (or help you develop them)? Volunteering on political campaigns or for charitable causes is one high-profile way to make new contacts and develop new skills. Leveraging opportunities within your

company is another. If a major new initiative is launching, try to jump on board. If competition is too fierce, you can take on jobs that others don't want (such as administrative duties) but that will help you meet people and build crucial connections.

5. Prove Your Worth

Every art student has a portfolio ready to be shown at a moment's notice. It's no different in the business world. There's a wide gulf between my knowing that you've launched a new business and trusting that you'll do a good job for clients. I may like you a lot, but unless I see proof of your skills, I'll hesitate to put my own reputation on the line by sending you referrals.

That's where blogs, podcasts, videocasts, and other forms of social media come in. The first step is securing your own internet domain name and starting to produce unique intellectual property. The second, even more critical, is ensuring that your material offers real value. You can quickly establish your expertise if you help people solve a problem or do something better, as was the case with Brian Clark (no relation), a former attorney who founded the website Copyblogger and has built a huge following with frequent tip-laden posts on how to improve web content and gain online followers.

Sharing the content you've created allows potential customers or employers to test-drive your approach before making a large commitment. (If you're a graphic designer, having contacts check out an image gallery of corporate logos you've created may inspire one of them to send you that major new account.)

After you've demonstrated your ability, solidify your rebrand by associating with the leading organizations in your field. Make a focused effort to publish in respected journals, speak at industry conferences, or take on a leadership role in your trade association. The resulting visibility, connections, and credibility can pay major dividends. When the Rhode Island consultant Alan Weiss took on the presidency of the National Speakers Association, New England, in the mid-1990s, the high-profile position

not only brought him new business (he traces \$250,000 in earnings directly to it) but helped him broaden his reputation and launch new offerings (he subsequently wrote two books on professional speaking and now provides high-end training).

Finally, you have to be consistent and committed as you move forward. A desire to expand into international work won't go far if you don't make the effort to learn new languages or the nuances of other cultures. And a onetime charitable gift is nice but quickly forgotten. The key is long-term effort. Michael Milken—once best known as a 1980s high-flier jailed for securities violations—dramatically redeemed his reputation through more than three decades of committed philanthropy. He has raised hundreds of millions of dollars to combat prostate cancer, melanoma, epilepsy, and more, earning a 2004 *Fortune* cover story (and mega-rebrand) titled “The Man Who Changed Medicine.”

Especially in the internet era, traces of your old brand will never completely disappear—and as long as you're thoughtful about what you've learned along the way, that's OK. The challenge is to be strategic about identifying how you wish to be perceived, developing a compelling story that explains your evolution, and then spreading that message.

Consider it “search engine optimization” for your life: The more connections you make, and the more value and content you regularly add to the stream, the more likely it is that your new brand will be known, recognized, and sought out.

A version of this article appeared in the March 2011 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.



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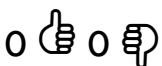
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Andre Castrillo a month ago

I enjoyed this article a great amount. I believe that re branding a self identity or even beginning an individual brand can go a long way in today's current business world. Though I think the importance can even overcome the world of business, socially we have been inventing a self brand for ourselves our entire lives and graduating from college or becoming an adult is the first step of branding our identity to the rest of the world; whether it be to society or the business world. I especially enjoyed reading about Robert Reich, the former U.S. secretary of labor, who decided to run for Massachusetts governor and chose to humorously introduce himself in public with noting his short stature.

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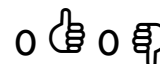
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