



Hoffman Digital Media

Branding Your Business Using Social Media

Week One- The Social Media Landscape

Guide to Accompany In-Person 4 week course

Week 1 - The Social Media Landscape

Understanding The Current Social Media Landscape

The most important thing to understand about the many online social media platforms out there is that they are simply new communication tools, just like email or the telephone. While many people look at the internet as simply an online newspaper, billboard, radio or other traditional broadcast media equivalent, the web actually breaks the wall that used to exist between you and your audience or customer. Now you can reach out to individual customers, but more importantly, they can reach back.

For many businesses, this can be disconcerting. You're used to being able to define your business and your brand, but now, customers get a much greater and much more public say in what that brand is to them.

We've started to say "Your brand isn't what you say it is, it's what Google says it is." Blog posts, Google reviews, Yelp, Foursquare notes, and word of mouth on all the major social platforms all form a picture of your business and brand that may or may not agree with what you see as your brand. Your brand has always been a reflection of your business and its practices, but now, it's far easier than ever through these channels for people to find out information about you long before they ever set foot in your door. The experience of their friends matters as much as their own personal experience with you.

Do you know what your customers and the community are saying about you? You should. And over the course of this 4 week program, we'll show you not only how to get to know your brand better and project this well on social platforms, but how to listen to how you are being perceived by others and what to do about it as well.

Step 1 Know Your Brand

The best description of a brand I've ever heard is "the emotional aftertaste after a set of experiences." When I do business with you or your company, how do I feel about the experience? Was it fantastic? Was it something I want to tell my friends about? Was it ok, and unremarkable? Or was there something wrong, and am I turned off by the experience? It turns out that people who are either surprised and delighted by an experience or have an extremely negative experience are the ones who are more likely to spread the news through social channels, explaining the polarity of many reviews online. These folks are motivated to share the great experience they had to help out their friends, or warn away others from a truly disappointing experience, and often do so in a way to exact a bit of justice from a business when they failed to get treated fairly (in their view).

If you know your brand and your business well, this will form the best foundation for participation in social media channels, where customers will expect businesses to be responsive to needs, notice them, and try to help them when they have problems. If you are looking towards social media as just another broadcast platform, you may have some success, but you run a high risk of running into problems when customers can't reach you or get problems solved, and this may very well lead to either backlash or finding that your efforts are simply ignored as nothing special.

10 Questions to Ask About Your Business and Brand

We suggest that you take a few moments and answer the following questions about your business, to see if your vision of your business matches up well with what your customers or the public would say if asked similar questions. Some of them may be silly, but put down some answers anyway. These will prove useful later on as we start to look at your social media profiles and how you promote your brand online. We've left space so you can use this as a workbook space. As you start answering these questions, keep in mind that your brand is what exists as a memory for folks even when you aren't there yourself.

1. Corporations are referred to in the law as "straw men" or virtual people, with many of the rights and privileges of ordinary citizens. If your business were a real person, what would they look like? What would they wear? Can you draw your business? Are they dressed in suits or is it more casual? What do they carry? Are they tall or average height? Are they high-end NYC types, or more suburban mom-like? Are they farmers, or regular joes, or bankers? Get as detailed as you like.

2. Who is your perfect customer? Is it someone exactly like your business persona above? Is it another business person, or someone else? Is it a mom or a dad or students? Is it a sports fanatic or a wine connoisseur? IS it a foodie or a "ladies who lunch" type? Rather than saying "anyone"- picture the person you would most like as your customer, and detail them down to what they wear, what they do, where they go, just like your business person above.

3. Where do your business persona and this perfect customer meet? How do they get to know each other? Do they meet over coffee? Playing Golf? Through friends? Hanging at the beach? How do these people interact?

4. Think about the average day with your customers. What do your real life customers look like? How close do they come to your idealized customer? If it's not a close match, what do you think you need to do to get more of the ideal customers, while still meeting the needs of your current customers?

5. How do your current customers find you? Why did they start doing business with you? Do you know? Do you know what they think of you? How do you know?

6. Go online to Google.com. Google yourself, and your company. What comes up? Are there online reviews? What do they say? Is anyone saying anything? Write down the websites where information appears, here, so you can go back and check it later, and see if anything changes. Consider this your "baseline".

7. Go to www.spokeo.com. This site likely has a lot of information about you, whether you know it or not. Are you comfortable with this listing? (If not, you can take steps to delete your Spokeo.com profile, found easily on the site.) Keep in mind that rather being good or bad, this is the amount of information everybody leaves on the web based on their daily activities, online and offline. What kind of information do you want the internet to have about you? List the things you would like to have people know about you and your business here.

8. What are the threshold experiences of your business like for your customers? What is it like to call your business or walk in the door? Are people greeted warmly? Are people cold-called and interrupted from their work? What is the first connection with your business look like online? What does your website look like? Does it tell them what you do, and is there a clear call to action? Does the online experience of your brand match the in person experience? Why or why not?

9. Who are your competitors? How would you describe them? (you can use the above metrics) How are you the same and how are you different? What makes you better for your ideal customer? What do you offer that they do not? Now check their reputation online and compare it to yours. Where are the differences? Are there any opportunities you can see to set yourself apart?

10. Are you in regular contact with customers in between sales? Why or why not? Is there a way you could encourage customers to leave reviews, refer business or otherwise help you with marketing your business? What could you do for them in exchange? Are there natural partnerships you can develop with current customers to get more out of your existing relationship with each other? (cross promotions, joint events, etc.)

Step 2 Understand the Social Networks

Facebook

Facts: Facebook is one of the most popular sites on the internet, let alone social media sites. Boasting over 800 million active users, Facebook would be the third largest country in the world, right behind China and India. Facebook started out in 2004 as a network for college students, and after opening up to public accounts for anyone over 13, it has gained rapid world-wide popularity, replacing previous networks like MySpace. In fact, 75% of the users are outside of the United States.

Facebook reports that the average user is connected to 80 community pages and has 130 friends. 20 million apps are installed every day and 500 million people use an application every month or use Facebook on another platform. Facebook also reports over 350 million people accessing Facebook from mobile devices including cell phones and tablets.

Facebook's Fact Sheet:

<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?factsheet>

About Facebook

Founded in February 2004, Facebook is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers. The company develops technologies that facilitate the sharing of information through the social graph, the digital mapping of people's real-world social connections. Anyone can sign up for Facebook and interact with the people they know in a trusted environment.

Product

Facebook, the product, is made up of core site functions and applications. Fundamental features to the experience on Facebook are a person's Home page and Profile. The Home page includes News Feed, a personalized feed of his or her friends updates. The Profile displays information about the individual he or she has chosen to share, including interests, education and work background and contact information. Facebook also includes core applications – Photos, Events, Videos, Groups, and Pages – that let people connect and share in rich and engaging ways. Additionally, people can communicate with one another through Chat, personal messages, Wall posts, Pokes, or Status Updates.

Interacting on Facebook

Everyone with a Facebook account has a personal profile and page. The data you provide setting up your profile is the same information Facebook uses to parse users for its targeted ads. It's good to remember that much of the data you provide Facebook is readily accessible and discoverable despite the ever-changing privacy settings, and that users are more Facebook's product than customers. That being said, developing a network of friends on Facebook can help build social relationships that can be helpful for business as well as personal purposes.

Caution for Contests and Sweepstakes

Since Facebook is inherently a social environment, it tends to work best for businesses when looked at as a place to set up an opt-in community, where you can offer useful information, special offers and the like to your opt-in customer base of friends. When Facebook is used more as a direct sell tool, it tends to violate the social expectation, like trying to sell used cars at a family reunion. Sure, you may get a few takers, but it violates a lot of social norms and ticks off the host.

There are special rules on Facebook regarding promotion and contests. If you want to give away an iPad or have some other sweepstakes, you must use an approved app for this. Custom apps can be very expensive, but pre-made apps

and Facebook promotional management tools are available from vendors like Wildfire and NorthSocial that can make setting up a contest on Facebook simple and relatively low cost. If you decide to try to run a contest outside of an approved Facebook app, you run the risk of having your account shut down and thrown off of Facebook.

Facebook Profiles

You can do lots of things with your Facebook page, including adding custom tabs and graphics inside something called iFrames. Some of this specialization takes some coding skills, and if you aren't really comfortable with things like CSS, HTML and FBML (if this looks like greek, don't worry...) you may want to consider hiring someone to customize your page. But don't feel like having some special Facebook page is necessary- most people and many big brands have regular Facebook pages, and it works just fine.

Your Facebook profile contains lots of information about you that you provide, ranging from basic demographic information to your tastes in entertainment. (Facebook then uses this information for people selling advertisements, to locate the "perfect" potential customer). When you create your personal profile, consider how this information helps fill out the picture of who you are for your friends, family and potential business partners. Beyond the business face, what do you like? Are you a NASCAR fan, or love knitting? Do you like travel, or cooking? While some of this information is personally revealing, think of it serving to form a basis for conversations and getting to know someone in advance of meeting. As a result of the public/private nature of Facebook, and the interaction between your personal profile and any business page that you might set up, I'd recommend keeping ultra-controversial subjects out of your profile. For example, unless it's part of your personal brand to be very liberal or conservative, posting information about hot button political issues may alienate part of your audience. However, if you are by reputation in your community known for these viewpoints and are fine with everyone knowing your opinion on these matters, then share them- they're what makes you unique.

Facebook Groups

Facebook has the ability to create private groups where you can have discussions between a select group of people, outside of the "public" view. This can be a great way to try to engage groups of friends or customers if you are working on new products, looking for feedback or to test market ideas, and the like. It might be a great choice to keep ongoing discussions and communication channels open between people- a group of local parents has used a Facebook group to keep in contact with things going on in the school district, and even update each other on issues pertaining to elections and local political issues. This might be a great way to keep a community group in contact between meetings, update each other on community work, etc.

Business Pages/Profiles

Facebook has this to say about Business Accounts:

Creation

What is the difference between a business account and a personal account?

Business accounts are designed for individuals who only want to use the site to administer Pages and their ad campaigns. For this reason, business accounts do not have the same functionality as personal accounts. Business accounts have limited access to information on the site. An individual with a business account can view all the Pages and Social Ads that they have created, however they will not be able to view the profiles (timelines) of users on the site or other content on the site that does not live on the Pages they administer. In addition, business accounts cannot be found in search and cannot send or receive friend requests.

How do I create a business account?

You may create a business account if you don't already have a standard Facebook account. To get started, you will need to first create a [Facebook Ad](#) or [Facebook Page](#). Once you've entered in the required information, you will be taken to the "Facebook Login" page and asked if you have a Facebook account. If you do not currently have a Facebook account, then at this point, please select "I do not have a Facebook account." You will then need to enter your email address and date of birth.

Please be aware that managing multiple accounts is a serious violation of Facebook's Terms of Use. If we determine that an individual has more than one account, we reserve the right to terminate all of their accounts.

This information shows that Facebook primarily wants people to use the platform as "users" and interactive participants on the site. They have different "levels" of business accounts- There are local/place pages, Company Pages, Organization pages, etc. Local Place pages may be the best if you are looking for people to check-in on Facebook at your location. (This works well for things like restaurants and event spaces, probably less well for businesses like heating and air companies that don;t depend on foot traffic.)

Hubspot, a fantastic inbound marketing company out of Boston, has a great blog post showing the "anatomy of an Effective Facebook Business Page" and a free, downloadable e-book entitled The 2011 Facebook Marketing Update you can find here: <http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/27537/The-Anatomy-of-an-Effective-Facebook-Business-Page.aspx>

This is probably the best and most authoritative guide to Facebook marketing in a nutshell, and it is worth your time if you are considering making Facebook an integral part of your marketing plan.

Twitter

Facts: Launched in July, 2006, Twitter turned 5 years old this year, and now boasts over 100 million active users every month, and approximately 50 million users every day. While it states there are 200 million registered users, a test account created showed that there are at least 418 million registered accounts, although many may be inactive or abandoned. Twitter boasts 400 million visitors a month, and hosts a billion tweets every 5 days. Twitter was designed to be a "microblogging" platform, with messages limited to 140 characters- it started out as a way for people in Odeo, a podcasting company, to stay in communication and brainstorm all day long. Twitter has grown in popularity in part due to its ease of use, integration with mobile, and its limited format. Several competitors tried to compete with Twitter and expand the 140 character limit, but none have been successful to date. Twitter has been widely adopted by the media. It has been used as an instant communications platform to relay information during major political uprisings, natural disasters and more, allowing people to get unfiltered news as it occurs, and for people to more accurately mobilize responses to problems as they arise. Since Twitter can run on the internet or on the cellular phone network, it has been more resilient and reliable as a communication channel during crisis.

What's the big deal about Twitter? or, *Why do I care what you are having for lunch?*

Twitter hits a sweet spot between email, a phone call and blogging as a quick communication platform. It's 140 character-limited messages makes it an easy way to communicate information with others in real time, or as they check into Twitter, to find messages specifically targeted to them. Twitter follows Metcalfe's law, in that the power of the communication network increases exponentially with the number of people connected to your own network. For example, if there's only one phone in town, it's worthless. But if everyone has a phone, each phone is more valuable because it can now communicate with many others, spreading information much faster and efficiently. Twitter harnesses

this power by allowing you to broadcast short messages to everyone, including those people in your network, and receive information from your network in turn. The more people you've selected into your network, the more chance useful information will come your way. Each time you add someone into your list of following/followers, the more valuable the service becomes.

Understanding Twitter: All those little shortcuts...

When people first start participating in Twitter, they can be confused by strings of characters such as @, RT, #, and other seemingly random characters. Believe it or not, after just a short time, this will all start to make sense. If you look at the picture on the right, you'll see examples of these signs and symbols in action. Let's decode a few of them here.

RT stands for retweet- this is when you pass along to your network something someone else already posted to Twitter, known as a "tweet".

The strings of characters such as ow.ly/7FTr3 is actually a shorted URL, that if clicked on, will take you to an article or resource the person who first posted it was discussing; there are several URL shorteners, including one called bit.ly which have great analytics attached, that allows you to see how far and wide your tweets are shared and travel across the internet.

@, followed by a Twitter name allows you to "talk" directly to that person and respond in a public way, without going to DM, or "Direct message", which is more private, one to one communication through Twitter. #, or hashtags, are a system designed for people to "tag" their posts and participate in ongoing topical discussions and chats. For example, there are many weekly chats on education that take place with #edchat as the hashtag, and people even use this hashtag between formally scheduled chats to communicate information.

Other times, events and meetings will have hashtags so even people not present can follow a bit of what's happening by following tweets coming out from people present in the meeting.

Third Party Twitter Clients

Many people use third party applications to help manage Twitter and subdivide the "streams" they listen to into smaller, more manageable groups. Many people use Hootsuite, which allows you to create a dashboard incorporating not only Twitter, but Facebook, Foursquare, LinkedIn, Myspace and more into one listening post. Additionally, Hootsuite allows you to share your dashboard with other people to help groups manage a social media presence, and also allows you to

The image shows a vertical list of tweets from Twitter. Each tweet includes a profile picture, name, and text. Annotations in green and red boxes explain various symbols and links used in the tweets:

- CaliLewis** (Call Lewis): "Great gift idea is the Kinect! It's \$50 off and comes with a game - amzn.to/vHF-Aux"
Annotation: "Link to amazon for purchase..."
- phillydotcom** (Philly.com): "Occupy Philly deals with eviction ow.ly/7FPbV"
Annotation: "Link to news article with shortened URL"
- PamMktgNut** (Pam Moore): "RT @dmScott: @PamMktgNut Yes! Newest book bit.ly/vpwEvC came out last week! Congrats!"
Annotations: "@ sign to directly respond to specific users" (pointing to @dmScott), "#Newsjacking" (pointing to #Newsjacking), "bit.ly shortened URL that will track who clicks on it" (pointing to bit.ly/vpwEvC)
- TaiGoodwin** (Tai Goodwin): ". @kishau, @baitarn2539 & @baitarn99 showed up in my social summary! smf.is/1B3ISv"
Annotation: "Hashtag for a new product" (pointing to @baitarn99)
- deandresays** (DeAndre Unshaw): "Photo: YOLANDA tumblr.co/ZqVgYyCSQ_Cq"
Annotation: "Tumblr, blog link to a photo"
- MelissaOnline** (Melissa Stewart): "Support Small Biz Saturday - help fuel the economy by shopping at a local business today: ow.ly/7FTr3 via @CoryBooker @isazapata @AnnTran_"
Annotation: "Shorted URL through Hootsuite"

“pre-schedule” tweets in advance, which is useful if you have decided to produce an editorial calendar for your social media interactions.

Tweetdeck allows you to monitor Twitter and different selected groups of users from either your desktop or from your mobile phone or tablet. Tweetdeck as a company was bought by Twitter this past spring, and many of Twitter’s own “native” displays on mobile applications reflect this merger.

Other third party Twitter clients include Ubersocial, Seesmic, Echofon, Twirl, and others. Twitter is not actively encouraging development of any additional third party clients, and Twitter has sought to improve its web and mobile experience for its native apps to encourage use of those over these other services.

Social media clients enabling you to monitor many channels include Hootsuite, Seesmic, Digsby, (which specializes in allowing you to receive and submit updates from your desktop without opening a browser) Social Oomph, and Ping.fm, which allows you to post to any and every social network from one dashboard.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn launched in 2003, and is billed as the largest professional network with over 135 million members in 200 countries, with 59% located outside the US. LinkedIn reports over 2 Billion people searches in 2010, and on pace for four billion for 2011. The network includes over 14 million students and recent college graduates among its members.

LinkedIn is best described as your online, interactive resume, matched with your rolodex. You are able to list facts about yourself in CV format, along with interests, recommendations, and more. There are groups in which you can offer and receive advice, look for opportunities or potential employees through your network, and fine tune your own work. You may be occasionally asked to make introductions of people you know to others, and you may do the same, but unlike other networks focused more on socializing, LinkedIn has a very professional, business oriented demeanor.

There have even been experiences where people have been laid off and received job offers the same day through their linkedIn network, making it an extremely powerful tool for well-connected people in a volatile economy.

LinkedIn is powerful because it lets people find out a bit about you before you start doing business. Think of it like professional Yellow Pages along with recommendations from people in your network. Like any other social network, LinkedIn becomes more useful as you grow your personal network, and receive recommendations from those you work with, professionally and through volunteer or side-projects. Your reputation already proceeds you- LinkedIn makes you more easily found and your strengths easier to assess long before you ever meet your future clients.

Your LinkedIn Profile

The image shows two sections of a LinkedIn profile. The top section, titled "Who's Viewed Your Profile?", displays two statistics: "7 Your profile has been viewed by 7 people in the past 15 days." and "25 You have shown up in search results 25 times in the past 7 days." The bottom section, titled "Your LinkedIn Network", displays "984 Connections link you to 11,885,316+ professionals" and "68,997 New people in your Network since November 23". Below this is a blue button labeled "Add Connections".

Your LinkedIn profile is your online curriculum vitae or resume. It should have relevant information about your education and experience, as well as information about how you can be contacted. If you have connections to other social networks online, you should feel comfortable about connecting them to your LinkedIn profile. Some people may want to keep their Facebook profile separate, but keep in mind, the same people looking for you on LinkedIn can just pop over to Facebook and check you out in that more relaxed atmosphere as well, so nothing is truly private once it's online.

At least twice a year, you should review and update your LinkedIn profile as appropriate. Ask for recommendations when appropriate from clients, business partners and the like. A collection of recommendations over time will help keep your profile fresh and relevant to anyone seeking to connect to you or employ you.

Interesting Tools

LinkedIn has groups which allow you to connect to others with similar interests. Like any online forum, groups tend to live by the 80-20 rule, but you will extract much more value out of groups if you participate with some frequency.

InMap allows you to map your network visually. When looking at my map, I can see that there are various clusters of people I am linked to- social media, online and digital marketing, education, local community, and Podcasting. This gives me a sense of what groups I am well integrated in, and which other ones may require a little more care and feeding. It also shows me where I have cross-over appeal, which could be helpful in any marketing plan about new services or products i might have to offer. Visualization of your social networks on Facebook or LinkedIn can give you some deeper insights into your network that may be helpful when looking for new opportunities.

Mobile Platforms- Foursquare, Groupon, Living Social and more

Already, daily deal sites like Groupon, Living social, and Deal Chicken are coming into their own. In return for publication out to a large, locally opted-in mailing list, these sites will send "Daily deals" out to its members. Businesses are often urged to make the deals substantial and irresistible, in exchange for a split of the proceeds with the coupon site. Some businesses have found this to be a good way to attract new business or at least have people try their services, but whether or not those folks will become "sticky" repeat customers is a bit of a guess. Groupon recently had its initial public offering (IPO) and it will be interesting to see how it performs in coming months, especially with the competition it is facing from local competitors.

Whitney Hoffman
Co-Author, Differentiated Instruction Book of Lists
Greater Philadelphia Area | Information Technology and Services

Whitney Hoffman I love this app! Makes a great slide, too!
InMaps - I visualized my LinkedIn network
inmaps.linkedininlabs.com

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Current Director of Operations at Podcamp Foundation
Organizer at Podcamp Philly
Director/CEO at Hoffman Digital Media

Past Organizer at Web2Open at 2009 Web 2.0 Expo
Organizer at Podcamp Boston
assistant organizer at HealthCamp Philadelphia
[see all](#)

Education Pennsylvania State University, The Dickinson School of Law
University of Pennsylvania

Recommendations 24 people have recommended Whitney

Connections 500+ connections

Websites The LD Podcast
OB GYN To Go
Personal Website

Twitter LDpodcast
WhitneyHoffman

Public Profile <http://www.linkedin.com/in/whitneyhoffmanlc>

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Summary

Director, Hoffman Digital Media, specializing in digital media strategy and content management. I work with small and medium sized businesses to help them hone and develop a social media and digital media strategy, and speak regularly on this and related topics to groups of all sizes.

Currently I am finishing a book on Differentiated Instruction for Jossey Bass with Jenifer Fox; we are both also moderating a group on Edutopia for Personalized Learning and Differentiated Instruction. You can find out more about this project at our website, <http://www.differentiatedinstruction.co>

By contrast, Foursquare is more of a game-based platform, where people can “check’in” in locations they frequent, and if they check in often enough, they can be declared “mayor”. Businesses can open a free account on Foursquare and offer deals to people checking in at the location, or perhaps a special for the Mayor. Some businesses have reported that this has helped increase business and checkins at their locations, and shoppers often are pleasantly surprised to find deals at locations they already frequent.

Foursquare requires that each participant sign up on their website, and people checkin on their mobile phones or devices through an app. This app also allows people to communicate where they are to friends, and leave messages and tips, much like review sites like Yelp. Even if you don't participate in Foursquare, you should still be aware of any reviews, tips or notes that people leave about your business on the site.

Yelp, Open Table, and other reservation/review/Things to Do sites are places where people may be leaving information about your business and their experiences for others to see. We strongly encourage you to set up Google Alerts or otherwise check and track what information is being posted online about your business as well as a policy about how to respond to both positive and negative comments.

Online Tools to Know About

Help a Reporter Out (HARO)

HARO is a website where requests from reporters and journalists all over the country are submitted two to three times a day, looking for information and resources. By subscribing to this site, you can get these emails sent to you, and you can screen them for opportunities to pitch reporters about your relevant business/products. You **MUST** keep your pitches on topic or you will be thrown off the list. This can be a great way to help you and/or your community to get relevant press that might otherwise be unavailable to any business without its own marketing agency or promoter.

Blogging

Having a blog for your business can be as simple as adding it into your existing website's functionality. Blogs act like ongoing magazines that can become places to help educate your customers about your business, provide useful and relevant information in your industry, as well as a place to highlight specials and offers. Blogs allow you to have up to date, relevant information on your website, which can help increase your traffic and search engine ranking. Not every business needs a blog or feels they have that much to say, but it can be a convenient place to publish the content of any client newsletters online to be re-used to help your website's rankings.

Blogs can include audio and video content, and can become a reason for people to keep coming back to your website over time. While maintaining a blog requires a consistent commitment,(you should post at least once a week) it can provide a useful forum for communication with your customers and providing continuing value after the sale, part of the important customer loyalty loop.

Articles and Blog Posts Worth Reading

The reason why your personal brand sucks

Christopher S. Penn, February 26, 2010

<http://www.christopherspenn.com/2010/02/the-reason-why-your-personal-brand-sucks/#.TrvIG1Z6I5o>

[Mitch Joel](#) recently [highlighted the army of clones](#) out there that are all trying to use the same personal brand, thus more or less killing personal branding. He's dead on. Go [search](#) for the number of social media experts on Twitter to see just how much personal branding has turned into Attack of the Clones.

Here's why your personal brand sucks. Here's why you're trying to be a clone of [Chris Brogan](#) or [CC Chapman](#) or [Whitney Hoffman](#) and failing miserably at it. It's not because you're stupid (well, most of you aren't, except for the folks who *repeatedly* get phished on Twitter for clicking on "LOL iz this u" links – yeah, you're stupid), it's not because you're boring (again, most of you aren't, but if your Twitterstream is filled only with "New Blog Post: ..." – yeah, you're boring), it's because **you've failed to distill your essential quality**.

Your essential quality is something that transcends any particular job, technology, platform, or idea. Your business card may say that you're a database engineer or a sales associate or the Vice President of Strategy and Innovation, but **that's not what's essential about you**. What's essential about you is a quality, a trait, a method of working in the world that is unique to you and very difficult to even put into words, much less copy.

Your essential quality will take you years, possibly a good chunk of your life, to even realize. Once you know it, though, once you find it and cultivate it, you rise rapidly above your peers. You rocket past them because you know this strength of yours and can focus what you do in your life to feed it and deliver results that no one else can deliver.

It's taken me close to two decades to figure out my own. Put into words succinctly, I'm really good at playing with blocks. I used to call it derivative thinking, but that's largely meaningless outside my skull. What I mean by playing with blocks is that I can see all these different pieces of systems and put them together in new and different ways. I'm a bridge between different worlds. This lets me do things like make [odd Twitter videos](#) combining tools and techniques together. This lets me be a competent [martial arts](#) practitioner, breaking free of only pre-arranged routines to use the tools in whatever fits the moment. This lets me talk to people of wildly different professions and trades and find ways to make whatever I have work with their businesses, and vice versa.

What you're good at, what your essential quality is, what makes you who you are isn't something anyone else can tell you. Others can't see inside your head, just the results that you produce – and how you got to those results is different from your perspective than anyone else's. Defining and refining your essential quality takes a lot of introspection and a lot of self-honesty, because as you investigate yourself more and more, you realize all the things that you're not good at, some of which may have defined your very identity in the past.

You'll have to let go of an awful lot that you think is you. For years, I thought I was a damn good technology professional. I'm not. I'm a certain kind of thinker whose essential quality happens to work well with technology. In the past half decade or so, I've thought I was a marketer, and heck, other people think so and even made me a professor of marketing. I'm not. My essential quality works well in marketing, too. In another decade, who knows what I'll be doing, but it will have that essential quality at its core.

The one suggestion I can offer if you have the guts, the bravery, to set out on that journey is to **find a creative outlet for expression of some kind.** Photography, art, music, dance, playing World of Warcraft, writing, speaking, martial arts, anything that lets you express yourself will do, because it will help you to pull out of yourself the various ways you express your essential quality. The process of figuring out what I'm good at took years. Most of it came from practicing the martial arts, because the method in which I train is ideally optimized for this kind of thinking, which means I get to practice the pure form of how I think on a regular basis in a way that delivers instant, unmistakable feedback. Your method of figuring out what you're good at will differ, but I recommend it be something expressive so that you can see your essential quality in action. **Once you figure out your essential quality, your personal brand will take care of itself.** You won't even need to name it or publicize it on your blog or Facebook page, because you'll be so damn good at being yourself that **your name will become your brand.** Folks might not even be able to put into words why it is they like you or want to work with you. They'll just know that they do, that they want to be around you, that they want to work with you, hire you, marry you, etc.

You will transcend personal branding itself, and ultimately live the life you were meant to live: yours.

Good luck on your journey. It's long, but the destination is worth the journey.

Brand dilution [Christopher S Penn](#) on Feb 24, 2011

<http://www.christopherspenn.com/2011/02/brand-dilution/#.TrvxFZ6I5o>

One of my favorite definitions of brand is by Ze Frank, who calls it **an emotional aftertaste from a set of experiences**, a very apt definition. Brand is identity, true, but it's also how that identity feels. When you think about your favorite brands, it's not from a cold, dispassionate analysis. Your brand impression of an iPhone isn't based on how quickly it boots up. It's how the

product makes you feel. **Brand is about emotion because emotion is what triggers recognition.**

If brand is an emotional aftertaste, then ***brand dilution is when the taste is spread too thin.*** You can spread a brand too thin by using it everywhere for everything, or by applying it to things that don't live up to their promise. For example, one of the worst cases of brand dilution I can think of is Wolfgang Puck. The famous TV chef licenses his name to just about everything food-related, even stuff that's terrible quality.

If you put the famous chef in front of the case bearing his name, what are the chances he'd say that the recipes were his own and were being displayed in the way he wants to be known? What are the chances, if you were able to invite him to your kitchen, that he'd cook exactly what's in the case if asked to produce that dish? What are the chances that, if you put his name-branded food on a plate in front of him unlabeled, he'd think it were anything other than mediocre? Slim at best.

What happens when a brand gets diluted or corrupted? Our brand anchors, the memories that create the emotional aftertaste, change. They shift. **They become anchored to the majority of the experiences we have with the brand, a new aftertaste.**

My anchor to Puck's brand has shifted over the years.

When I see Wolfgang Puck's name on a product, the feeling it conjures up isn't the sensual power of food his agency and PR team is probably hoping for. It instead summons up crappy quality goods at very high prices, like the airport sandwich bar or crappy hotel room coffee, laughably billed as "Wolfgang Puck's Chef's Reserve".

Be very, very careful who and what you lend your own brand – personal or corporate – to. If the product or service doesn't fulfill your promise, your brand will suffer until the only emotional aftertaste left is bitterness.



The following article is over a decade old now, but does a great job in explaining the concept of personal branding.

The Brand Called You- Tom Peters, Aug. 31, 1997

<http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/10/brandyou.html>

Big companies understand the importance of brands. Today, in the Age of the Individual, you have to be your own brand. Here's what it takes to be the CEO of Me Inc.

It's a new brand world.

That cross-trainer you're wearing -- one look at the distinctive swoosh on the side tells everyone who's got you branded. That coffee travel mug you're carrying -- ah, you're a Starbucks woman! Your T-shirt with the distinctive Champion "C" on the sleeve, the blue jeans with the prominent Levi's rivets, the watch with the hey-this-certifies-I-made-it icon on the face, your fountain pen with the maker's symbol crafted into the end ...

You're branded, branded, branded, branded.

It's time for me -- and you -- to take a lesson from the big brands, a lesson that's true for anyone who's interested in what it takes to stand out and prosper in the new world of work.

Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding. We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You.

It's that simple -- and that hard. And that inescapable.

Behemoth companies may take turns buying each other or acquiring every hot startup that catches their eye -- mergers in 1996 set records. Hollywood may be interested in only blockbusters and book publishers may want to put out only guaranteed best-sellers. But don't be fooled by all the frenzy at the humongous end of the size spectrum.

The real action is at the other end: the main chance is becoming a free agent in an economy of free agents, looking to have the best season you can imagine in your field, looking to do your best work and chalk up a remarkable track record, and looking to establish your own micro equivalent of the Nike swoosh. Because if you do, you'll not only reach out toward every opportunity within arm's (or laptop's) length, you'll not only make a noteworthy contribution to your team's success -- you'll also put yourself in a great bargaining position for next season's free-agency market.

The good news -- and it is largely good news -- is that everyone has a chance to stand out. Everyone has a chance to learn, improve, and build up their skills. Everyone has a chance to be a brand worthy of remark.

Who understands this fundamental principle? The big companies do. They've come a long way in a short time: it was just over four years ago, April 2, 1993 to be precise, when Philip Morris cut the price of Marlboro cigarettes by 40 cents a pack. That was on a Friday. On Monday, the stock market value of packaged goods companies fell by \$25 billion. Everybody agreed: brands were doomed.

Today brands are everything, and all kinds of products and services -- from accounting firms to sneaker makers to restaurants -- are figuring out how to transcend the narrow boundaries of their categories and become a brand surrounded by a Tommy Hilfiger-like buzz.

Who else understands it? Every single Web site sponsor. In fact, the Web makes the case for branding more directly than any packaged good or consumer product ever could. Here's what the Web says: Anyone can have a Web site. And today, because anyone can ... anyone does! So how do you know which sites are worth visiting, which sites to bookmark, which sites are worth going to more than once? The answer: branding. The sites you go back to are the sites you trust. They're the sites where the brand name tells you that the visit will be worth your time -- again and again. The brand is a promise of the value you'll receive.

The same holds true for that other killer app of the Net -- email. When everybody has email and anybody can send you email, how do you decide whose messages you're going to read and respond to first -- and whose you're going to send to the trash unread? The answer: personal branding. The name of the email sender is every bit as important a brand -- is a brand -- as the name of the Web site you visit. It's a promise of the value you'll receive for the time you spend reading the message.

Nobody understands branding better than professional services firms. Look at McKinsey or Arthur Andersen for a model of the new rules of branding at the company and personal level. Almost every professional services firm works with the same business model. They have almost no hard assets -- my guess is that most probably go so far as to rent or lease every tangible item they possibly can to keep from having to own anything. They have lots of soft assets -- more conventionally known as people, preferably smart, motivated, talented people. And they have huge revenues -- and astounding profits.

They also have a very clear culture of work and life. You're hired, you report to work, you join a team -- and you immediately start figuring out how to deliver value to the customer. Along the way, you learn stuff, develop your skills, hone your abilities, move from project to project. And if you're really smart, you figure out how to distinguish yourself from all the other very smart people walking around with \$1,500 suits, high-powered laptops, and well-polished resumes. Along the way, if you're really smart, you figure out what it takes to create a distinctive role for yourself -- you create a message and a strategy to promote the brand called You.

What makes You different?

Start right now: as of this moment you're going to think of yourself differently! You're not an "employee" of General Motors, you're not a "staffer" at General Mills, you're not a "worker" at

General Electric or a "human resource" at General Dynamics (oops, it's gone!). Forget the Generals! You don't "belong to" any company for life, and your chief affiliation isn't to any particular "function." You're not defined by your job title and you're not confined by your job description.

Starting today you are a brand.

You're every bit as much a brand as Nike, Coke, Pepsi, or the Body Shop. To start thinking like your own favorite brand manager, ask yourself the same question the brand managers at Nike, Coke, Pepsi, or the Body Shop ask themselves: What is it that my product or service does that makes it different? Give yourself the traditional 15-words-or-less contest challenge. Take the time to write down your answer. And then take the time to read it. Several times.

If your answer wouldn't light up the eyes of a prospective client or command a vote of confidence from a satisfied past client, or -- worst of all -- if it doesn't grab you, then you've got a big problem. It's time to give some serious thought and even more serious effort to imagining and developing yourself as a brand.

Start by identifying the qualities or characteristics that make you distinctive from your competitors -- or your colleagues. What have you done lately -- this week -- to make yourself stand out? What would your colleagues or your customers say is your greatest and clearest strength? Your most noteworthy (as in, worthy of note) personal trait?

Go back to the comparison between brand You and brand X -- the approach the corporate biggies take to creating a brand. The standard model they use is feature-benefit: every feature they offer in their product or service yields an identifiable and distinguishable benefit for their customer or client. A dominant feature of Nordstrom department stores is the personalized service it lavishes on each and every customer. The customer benefit: a feeling of being accorded individualized attention -- along with all of the choice of a large department store.

So what is the "feature-benefit model" that the brand called You offers? Do you deliver your work on time, every time? Your internal or external customer gets dependable, reliable service that meets its strategic needs. Do you anticipate and solve problems before they become crises? Your client saves money and headaches just by having you on the team. Do you always complete your projects within the allotted budget? I can't name a single client of a professional services firm who doesn't go ballistic at cost overruns.

Your next step is to cast aside all the usual descriptors that employees and workers depend on to locate themselves in the company structure. Forget your job title. Ask yourself: What do I do that adds remarkable, measurable, distinguished, distinctive value? Forget your job description. Ask yourself: What do I do that I am most proud of? Most of all, forget about the standard rungs of progression you've climbed in your career up to now. Burn that damnable "ladder" and ask yourself: What have I accomplished that I can unabashedly brag about? If you're going to be a brand, you've got to become relentlessly focused on what you do that adds value, that you're proud of, and most important, that you can shamelessly take credit for.

When you've done that, sit down and ask yourself one more question to define your brand:

What do I want to be famous for? That's right -- famous for!

What's the pitch for You?

So it's a cliché: don't sell the steak, sell the sizzle. It's also a principle that every corporate brand understands implicitly, from Omaha Steaks's through-the-mail sales program to Wendy's "we're just regular folks" ad campaign. No matter how beefy your set of skills, no matter how tasty you've made that feature-benefit proposition, you still have to market the bejesus out of your brand -- to customers, colleagues, and your virtual network of associates.

For most branding campaigns, the first step is visibility. If you're General Motors, Ford, or Chrysler, that usually means a full flight of TV and print ads designed to get billions of "impressions" of your brand in front of the consuming public. If you're brand You, you've got the same need for visibility -- but no budget to buy it.

So how do you market brand You?

There's literally no limit to the ways you can go about enhancing your profile. Try moonlighting! Sign up for an extra project inside your organization, just to introduce yourself to new colleagues and showcase your skills -- or work on new ones. Or, if you can carve out the time, take on a freelance project that gets you in touch with a totally novel group of people. If you can get them singing your praises, they'll help spread the word about what a remarkable contributor you are.

If those ideas don't appeal, try teaching a class at a community college, in an adult education program, or in your own company. You get credit for being an expert, you increase your standing as a professional, and you increase the likelihood that people will come back to you with more requests and more opportunities to stand out from the crowd.

If you're a better writer than you are a teacher, try contributing a column or an opinion piece to your local newspaper. And when I say local, I mean local. You don't have to make the op-ed page of the New York Times to make the grade. Community newspapers, professional newsletters, even inhouse company publications have white space they need to fill. Once you get started, you've got a track record -- and clips that you can use to snatch more chances.

And if you're a better talker than you are teacher or writer, try to get yourself on a panel discussion at a conference or sign up to make a presentation at a workshop. Visibility has a funny way of multiplying; the hardest part is getting started. But a couple of good panel presentations can earn you a chance to give a "little" solo speech -- and from there it's just a few jumps to a major address at your industry's annual convention.

The second important thing to remember about your personal visibility campaign is: it all matters. When you're promoting brand You, everything you do -- and everything you choose not to do -- communicates the value and character of the brand. Everything from the way you handle

phone conversations to the email messages you send to the way you conduct business in a meeting is part of the larger message you're sending about your brand.

Partly it's a matter of substance: what you have to say and how well you get it said. But it's also a matter of style. On the Net, do your communications demonstrate a command of the technology? In meetings, do you keep your contributions short and to the point? It even gets down to the level of your brand You business card: Have you designed a cool-looking logo for your own card? Are you demonstrating an appreciation for design that shows you understand that packaging counts -- a lot -- in a crowded world?

The key to any personal branding campaign is "word-of-mouth marketing." Your network of friends, colleagues, clients, and customers is the most important marketing vehicle you've got; what they say about you and your contributions is what the market will ultimately gauge as the value of your brand. So the big trick to building your brand is to find ways to nurture your network of colleagues -- consciously.

What's the real power of You?

If you want to grow your brand, you've got to come to terms with power -- your own. The key lesson: power is not a dirty word!

In fact, power for the most part is a badly misunderstood term and a badly misused capability. I'm talking about a different kind of power than we usually refer to. It's not ladder power, as in who's best at climbing over the adjacent bods. It's not who's-got-the-biggest-office-by-six-square-inches power or who's-got-the-fanciest-title power.

It's influence power.

It's being known for making the most significant contribution in your particular area. It's reputational power. If you were a scholar, you'd measure it by the number of times your publications get cited by other people. If you were a consultant, you'd measure it by the number of CEOs who've got your business card in their Rolodexes. (And better yet, the number who know your beeper number by heart.)

Getting and using power -- intelligently, responsibly, and yes, powerfully -- are essential skills for growing your brand. One of the things that attracts us to certain brands is the power they project. As a consumer, you want to associate with brands whose powerful presence creates a halo effect that rubs off on you.

It's the same in the workplace. There are power trips that are worth taking -- and that you can take without appearing to be a self-absorbed, self-aggrandizing megalomaniacal jerk. You can do it in small, slow, and subtle ways. Is your team having a hard time organizing productive meetings? Volunteer to write the agenda for the next meeting. You're contributing to the team, and you get to decide what's on and off the agenda. When it's time to write a post-project re-

port, does everyone on your team head for the door? Beg for the chance to write the report -- because the hand that holds the pen (or taps the keyboard) gets to write or at least shape the organization's history.

Most important, remember that power is largely a matter of perception. If you want people to see you as a powerful brand, act like a credible leader. When you're thinking like brand You, you don't need org-chart authority to be a leader. The fact is you are a leader. You're leading You!

One key to growing your power is to recognize the simple fact that we now live in a project world. Almost all work today is organized into bite-sized packets called projects. A project-based world is ideal for growing your brand: projects exist around deliverables, they create measurables, and they leave you with braggables. If you're not spending at least 70% of your time working on projects, creating projects, or organizing your (apparently mundane) tasks into projects, you are sadly living in the past. Today you have to think, breathe, act, and work in projects.

Project World makes it easier for you to assess -- and advertise -- the strength of brand You. Once again, think like the giants do. Imagine yourself a brand manager at Procter & Gamble: When you look at your brand's assets, what can you add to boost your power and felt presence? Would you be better off with a simple line extension -- taking on a project that adds incrementally to your existing base of skills and accomplishments? Or would you be better off with a whole new product line? Is it time to move overseas for a couple of years, venturing outside your comfort zone (even taking a lateral move -- damn the ladders), tackling something new and completely different?

Whatever you decide, you should look at your brand's power as an exercise in new-look résumé; management -- an exercise that you start by doing away once and for all with the word "résumé." You don't have an old-fashioned résumé anymore! You've got a marketing brochure for brand You. Instead of a static list of titles held and positions occupied, your marketing brochure brings to life the skills you've mastered, the projects you've delivered, the braggables you can take credit for. And like any good marketing brochure, yours needs constant updating to reflect the growth -- breadth and depth -- of brand You.

What's loyalty to You?

Everyone is saying that loyalty is gone; loyalty is dead; loyalty is over. I think that's a bunch of crap.

I think loyalty is much more important than it ever was in the past. A 40-year career with the same company once may have been called loyalty; from here it looks a lot like a work life with very few options, very few opportunities, and very little individual power. That's what we used to call indentured servitude.

Today loyalty is the only thing that matters. But it isn't blind loyalty to the company. It's loyalty to your colleagues, loyalty to your team, loyalty to your project, loyalty to your customers, and loyalty to yourself. I see it as a much deeper sense of loyalty than mindless loyalty to the Company Z logo.

I know this may sound like selfishness. But being CEO of Me Inc. requires you to act selfishly -- to grow yourself, to promote yourself, to get the market to reward yourself. Of course, the other side of the selfish coin is that any company you work for ought to applaud every single one of the efforts you make to develop yourself. After all, everything you do to grow Me Inc. is gravy for them: the projects you lead, the networks you develop, the customers you delight, the braggables you create generate credit for the firm. As long as you're learning, growing, building relationships, and delivering great results, it's good for you and it's great for the company. That win-win logic holds for as long as you happen to be at that particular company. Which is precisely where the age of free agency comes into play. If you're treating your résumé as if it's a marketing brochure, you've learned the first lesson of free agency. The second lesson is one that today's professional athletes have all learned: you've got to check with the market on a regular basis to have a reliable read on your brand's value. You don't have to be looking for a job to go on a job interview. For that matter, you don't even have to go on an actual job interview to get useful, important feedback.

The real question is: How is brand You doing? Put together your own "user's group" -- the personal brand You equivalent of a software review group. Ask for -- insist on -- honest, helpful feedback on your performance, your growth, your value. It's the only way to know what you would be worth on the open market. It's the only way to make sure that, when you declare your free agency, you'll be in a strong bargaining position. It's not disloyalty to "them"; it's responsible brand management for brand You -- which also generates credit for them.

What's the future of You?

It's over. No more vertical. No more ladder. That's not the way careers work anymore. Linearity is out. A career is now a checkerboard. Or even a maze. It's full of moves that go sideways, forward, slide on the diagonal, even go backward when that makes sense. (It often does.) A career is a portfolio of projects that teach you new skills, gain you new expertise, develop new capabilities, grow your colleague set, and constantly reinvent you as a brand.

As you scope out the path your "career" will take, remember: the last thing you want to do is become a manager. Like "résumé," "manager" is an obsolete term. It's practically synonymous with "dead end job." What you want is a steady diet of more interesting, more challenging, more provocative projects. When you look at the progression of a career constructed out of projects, directionality is not only hard to track -- Which way is up? -- but it's also totally irrelevant.

Instead of making yourself a slave to the concept of a career ladder, reinvent yourself on a semiregular basis. Start by writing your own mission statement, to guide you as CEO of Me Inc. What turns you on? Learning something new? Gaining recognition for your skills as a technical

wizard? Shepherding new ideas from concept to market? What's your personal definition of success? Money? Power? Fame? Or doing what you love? However you answer these questions, search relentlessly for job or project opportunities that fit your mission statement. And review that mission statement every six months to make sure you still believe what you wrote. No matter what you're doing today, there are four things you've got to measure yourself against. First, you've got to be a great teammate and a supportive colleague. Second, you've got to be an exceptional expert at something that has real value. Third, you've got to be a broad-gauged visionary -- a leader, a teacher, a farsighted "imagineer." Fourth, you've got to be a businessperson -- you've got to be obsessed with pragmatic outcomes. It's this simple: You are a brand. You are in charge of your brand. There is no single path to success. And there is no one right way to create the brand called You. Except this: Start today.

Or else.

Tom Peters (TJPET@aol.com) is the world's leading brand when it comes to writing, speaking, or thinking about the new economy. He has just released a CD-ROM, "Tom Peters' Career Survival Guide" (Houghton Mifflin interactive). Rob Walker contributed the brand profile sidebars.

