

Levers of Personal Branding to Optimize Success

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Abstract: Nowadays there are many publications on employer and product branding. Companies are driven by the aim to be more attractive for the customer with respect to their competitors. Personal branding is often not mentioned in this framework, even though employers and each company take advantage of branding through individuals. In this respect, the concept of trust is more and more becoming the core value of a brand and it is less possible to achieve success through the products only by themselves as products are even more and more getting exchangeable. The present paper outlines certain ways how the concepts of current corporate and product branding strategies can be transferred to individuals. They are used for a corporate strategy or for an individual strategy. An individual personal branding is increasing the likeliness of working in the right environment for personal growth which can bring more satisfaction and success. We identified 102 successful people worldwide, who meet the criteria of corporate or product brand. A qualitative survey has been carried out on their behaviour and activities to develop and strengthen their brand. The leading question was: how do you strengthen your brand? We compared the results with the criteria in secondary literature on how to become a corporate and product brand. The results suggest new directions to continue the research on personal, corporate and product branding. They can be used for self-branding strategies as well as for improving the corporate and product strategies specifically.

Key words: personal brands; branding; trust; communications; values

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1. Introduction

Branding is a very popular concept. One talks often more about the brand value of a company than its real value (Meckel & Schmied, 2008; Miller & Muir, 2004). The brand decides more and more about the value of a company, especially if it's listed at the stock exchange and if more than one company offers the same product at the same time. Branding helps to develop a good reputation and to sharpen ones uniqueness. The mechanisms are similar, when it comes to an individual uniqueness. If their offers are replaceable they need to strengthen their personal branding. Why is this important? At first being a strong and successful brand characterizes people in an easy transparent way, which helps companies to see better, which skills of the employees are to be employed at a specific place. This of course is satisfying and helps the people to succeed in each dimension as they know which

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potential they can develop. Also developing their strengths increases the attention of the people around and can help to maximize an individual success. The idea of personal branding is not a new one. Napoleon Hills writes about this particular phenomenon in 1928 in his book *The Law of Success*. New are the circumstances in the present world of globalization. Being connected to people from all over the world through the Internet, the necessity to differentiate one from the others has been increasingly developed.

2. Theoretical Background

Brand and branding can be defined from different disciplines. This paper places branding close to integrated communication management, as it is described, e.g., by Zerfaß (2008) and Mast (2010). It focuses on the understanding of the term *communication* of the Essener tradition according to Ungeheuer (1987) with a special emphasis on the social, dialogical and semantic aspects. Product brand means in this context a “name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from those of other sellers” (Fan, 2002; Gregory, 2003; Marketing Accountability Standards Board of the Marketing Accountability Foundation, 2012). It identifies a product, service, company or a person. Holt describes the characteristics of strong brands in a much more detailed manner which is as follow: “*They have distinctive and favourable associations, they generate buzz, and they have core consumers with deep emotional attachments*” (Holt, 2004, p. 35). To get a strong brand, an easy clear emotional message, which is related to the target audience and their perception is essential (Fineman, 2008; Goleman, 1995). We call this brand awareness. There are different ways to communicate a brand identity, e.g., a logo, special colours, a special sound, style, movement, the whole visual appearance, name, communication and/or environment. The brand identity is the outward expression of a brand and created to receive the planned result of an increase in turnover and/or popularity. The brand image is the perception of the customer about the brand (Neumeier, 2004, p. 20). The smaller the gap between brand identity and brand image, the stronger the brand is. In addition, the brand identity often changes due to the competitors’ situation to stay clear enough, as well as due to the target audience to stay close and inspiring enough to them. It should strengthen the trust of the target audience to believe in the right product, service, company and person.

In this respect it is notable that currently trust seems to be shrinking in highly developed, democratic countries. There seems to be an increasing common fear that audiences are being manipulated by the mass media, companies, services and individuals. At the same time, people in developed countries increasingly turn to alternative information sources, like social networks, blogs and other forms of online communication where they seek for the right evaluation of the offered products (Quandt, 2012, p. 7). In fact, trust is an essential social and communicative notion, which is mainly aimed at a specific connection between two or more social interactants. Numerous definitions can be found in diverse disciplines: e.g., in sociology (e.g., Coleman, 1990), social psychology (Deutsch, 1958), political science (Miller, 1974), economics (Williamson, 1993), communication studies (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), as well as some other related disciplines. The theoretical basis for the concept of trust in news media is based on selectivity, that is to say “trust in news media means trust in their specific selectivity rather than in objectivity or truth” (Kohring & Matthes, 2007).

Despite the existing contradictory viewpoints and subsequent definitions of the term, there is a certain consensus on then basic and most important meaning of trust, i.e., it is necessary and present when the actors (the trustors) cannot or do not want to control the actions of their interactants, expecting a certain action on the part of these alteri (trustees) (Quandt, 2012, p. 8). As we may guess, these expectations are primarily based on a past

experience, which can be based on both a former personal experience and any other experience connected with the same or similar actors under the same and/or similar circumstances and situations. Here, the emotional background knowledge comes to the fore and plays an irreplaceable role in guiding the communicators throughout the whole speech event. Moreover, it is generally believed that the expected actions of the trustees will not have an emotional negative impact on the trustors later on; moreover, the effects and consequences are supposed to be beneficial for both parts.

In social communication especially there is always a certain need for trust because of the problem of societal complexity and contingency of events in social constellations (Quandt, 2012, p. 8). As everyday events cannot be fully foreseen or predicated, there is always a certain need of *trust* between the interactants to develop safely grounded expectations upon the outcome of the events which serves a secure basis for successful social action and interaction. Hence, trust is, undoubtedly, a crucial characteristic feature of the societal communication irrespective from logical or emotional reasons, since the lack of it can bring to the malfunctioning of the society. This fact leads to the observation that for building successful brands within the frames of this or that cultural or sub-cultural society, there is an urgent need of firstly building trust for the offered brand which sometimes seems to be dwindling nowadays.

According to Quandt (2012), there are various types of trustees: trust in people one knows quite well based on their close relationship status when the interactants possess a large amount of information on each other concerning different fields which accompanies both sides of the interlocutors during the whole speech event makes their actions mutually to a greater degree predictable, and there is trust in people whom we do not know well. Although a lot of scientists consider the first type of the aforementioned trustees as irrelevant as there is always a natural propensity in trusting in people who stand close to us, yet we do consider it as relevant since a lot of what happens in the process of communication occurs on the basis of emotional background knowledge which makes the act of any joint communication possible the basis of which should be trust. According to Johnson and Kaye (1998) if people do not trust what they see or hear in the traditional mass media or from other on-line media sources, they are less likely to pay any attention to it. Thus, while making personal branding, the issue of trust indeed comes to the forefront.

Personal branding can be described as the process and status, whereby people are marked as brands (Lair, 2005, pp. 307-343). The rules, which belong to the brands, also belong to the personal brands. The functions of branding and personal branding are the organization of the production, development and guiding of the brand and value, the coordination of the communication processes in all areas, the behaviour management of planned communication and unplanned perceived action with the goal to receive the trust and credibility of the people around. Holt describes the strategy with the chronology of “Targeting, Positioning, Brand equity, Brand loyalty, Cobranding and Communications” (Holt, 2004, p. 7).

3. Personal Branding Today

There are different ways and areas, how personal branding is realized today. The range differs from the private interest to be recognized as a special person over the need to get a job by presenting himself in a special manner to the goal to develop him into a money making brand. The further goal is then to get as much followers as possible who like to spend time and money on consuming things related to this person. Holt differentiates between three different models of conventional branding, the viral, mind-share and emotional branding (Holt,

2004, p. 14). These three models are conventional and work with a focus on mentioned areas. Holt adds the cultural branding as the branding of *icons*. While lots of brands are dominated by marketing activities he separates from this the brands, the icons, which are built by communication, emotional stories and myths:

“Identity brands are different. They compete with other cultural products to perform myths that resolve cultural contradictions. Identity brands participate in myth markets, competing and collaborating with films, music, television, sports (...) Iconic brands not only target the most appropriate myth market; they are also sensitive to cultural disruptions, shifting their target when opportunities strikes” (Holt, 2004, p. 39).

What Holt says about product brands also applies to personal brands. Here the role of interpersonal communication is of utmost importance which is mainly being treated as a process, which is largely based on the mental picture of the world of the speakers and listeners. It largely embraces a great deal of the conscious and subconscious framework. Models to describe this phenomenon are familiar in linguistics as models of speech acts as Schulz von Thun points it out with his suggestion of four sides of a message. He proposed the communication model called a *four-sides model*, which is also known as *communication square* (Schulz von Thun, 1981; 1998; 2011). According to this model every piece of information includes four messages. Hence, the four sides of the encoded information are as follows: fact, self-revealing, relationship, and appeal. The communication square describes the multi-layered structure of human utterance. It combines the postulate (second axiom) of Paul Watzlawick (1969) which implies that every communication has content and relationship aspect, with the three sides of the Organon model proposed by Karl Bühler (Bugental, 1966, pp. 181-219), according to which every piece of information contains something about the matter, the sender and the receiver, where according to us, the role of emotions is no less important (Klewes & Wreschniok, 2010; Hochschild, 1983). Communication is the key, but it is not enough mastering to deliver a clear and emotional message. One can find lots of guidebooks about personal branding and some academic publications about product branding (Miller & Muir, 2004; Neumeier, 2004; Olins, 2003; Schmidt & Ludlow, 2002), but there’s rather no academic publication about personal branding (Schawbel, 2010; Bence, 2008). As there are lots of people, who consider the criteria of brands’ matching, one needs an overview of the current situation and development. New concepts of story telling and the opportunities of social media as well as the ideas of social responsibility must be taken into account for personal branding (Giffin, 2011; Fineman, 2008; Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 2001).

4. Levers of Personal Branding to Optimize Success. Methods of the Survey

The research aims at identifying current levers of personal branding to optimize personal success. Therefore we figured out the categories, where people stand in the focus of a target audience or of the general public view. These are politicians, sportsmen, artists (music, TV, cinema, painting...), noblewomen and noblemen, general managers/CEOs or entrepreneurs, religious leaders, journalists and authors. According to Holts definition of the characteristics of a brand (2004) we set indicators together with variables as measurability criteria to figure out, which people fit into these categories of a brand:

- (1) Has distinctive and favourable associations
- (2) Generates buzz
- (3) Has core consumers with deep emotional attachments

Out of the aforementioned we figured out 102 people, who fit into all categories of being a brand. Then we framed questions to figure out, what the levers of personal branding are:

- (1) What characterizes the person in its main public role?
- (2) How is he/she perceived in public?
- (3) What does the person to be perceived in the way she/he wants?
- (4) Does he/she says that he/she feels like a brand and what is the reason for this?

We decided to use open questions to allow the respondents to answer in their own words. The questionnaire does not contain tick-boxes but instead leaves a blank section for the response. As there are no standard answers to these questions, data analysis is more complex. We obtained our answers from the target group, their PR managers or speakers. The first contact was made via phone. Then we sent the responsible people an email with the questions included. Parallely we analyzed the print and nonprint media about answers to the questions above too. Sources, which we checked, were websites like the official website and fan websites, knowledge platforms like wikipedia, social media platforms like you tube, twitter, facebook, press articles like interviews, articles, TV shows and secondary literature like a biography. That means we used two methods of data collection, primary data and secondary data collection. We used a structured questionnaire with the four questions mentioned above and used this questionnaire at the same time to gather secondary data. With this method we collected many different data sets from different perspectives to work from a wide base, extend the scatter band and be in this way valid, objective and reliable. A nominal scale enables the classification of individuals, objects or responses into subgroups based on a common/shared property or characteristic. A variable measured on a nominal scale may have one, two or more subcategories, depending upon the extent of variation. We added at first the answers to the names. Then we identified the main themes that reflect these meanings. People use different linguistic means to express themselves. So we selected wording of the theme in a way that accurately represents the meaning of the responses categorized under a theme. To count the number of times a theme has been illustrated in a questionnaire or research analysis we assigned codes to the main themes and classified responses under the main themes. Then we integrated the themes and responses into categories. These categories were checked then for their accordance with each other in each topic mentioned in the answers.

5. Results: Personal Branding Trends

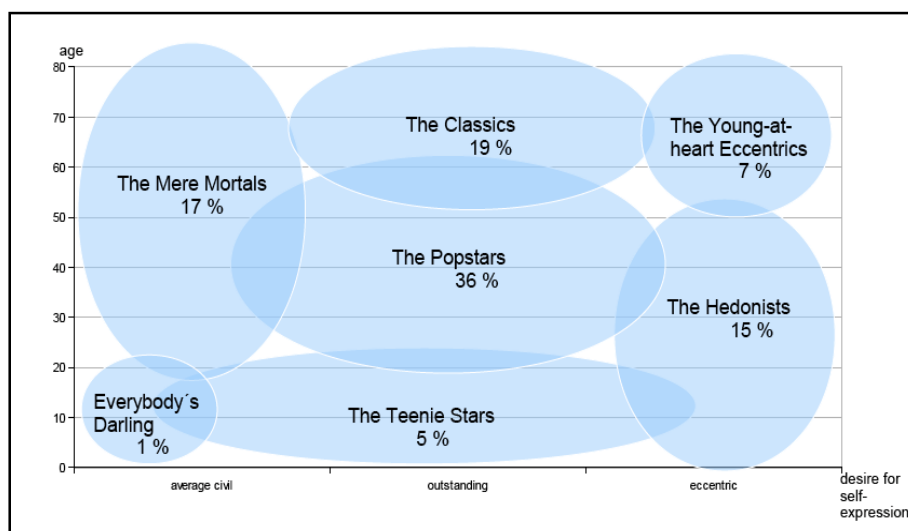


Figure 1a Personal Branding Clusters

Source: Gursch/Gursch/Ternès 2012

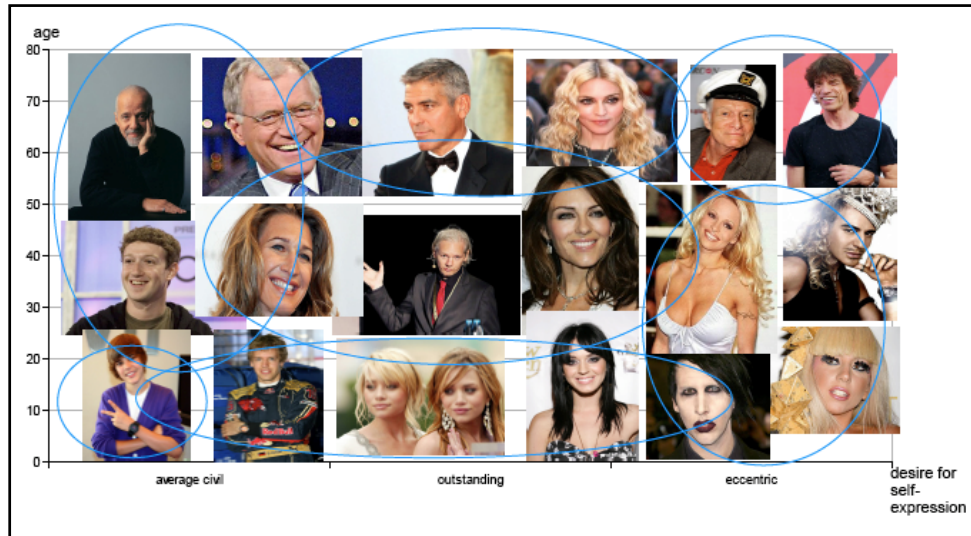


Figure 1b Personal Branding Clusters

Source: Gursch/Gursch/Ternès 2012

We have identified 7 categories and specifications of personal branding: The Mere Mortals, Everybody’s Darling, The Teenie Stars, The Popstars, The Classics, The Hedonists and The Young-at-Heart Eccentrics (Figure 1a). These 7 branding categories are positioned in a portfolio, where the y-axis represent age and the x-axis represents the desire for self-expression as described by the values average civil, outstanding and eccentric (Figure 1a). The Popstars like Ashton Kutcher account for 36% and are therefore the group with the highest percentage followed by the category The Classics like George Clooney account for 19% (Figure 1b). These categories represent different types of personal brands with different habits, attitudes, appearances and factors for success following the definition as above already mentioned. These key factors are depicted in Figure 2. The key factors for being a personal brand are different to each other. There’s a small overlapping in each category like charity, which is a key factor for The Popstars and for The Classics as well. George Clooney is for example well known for his charity commitment. Ashton Kutcher is well known for being a role model for young men (Figure 1b).

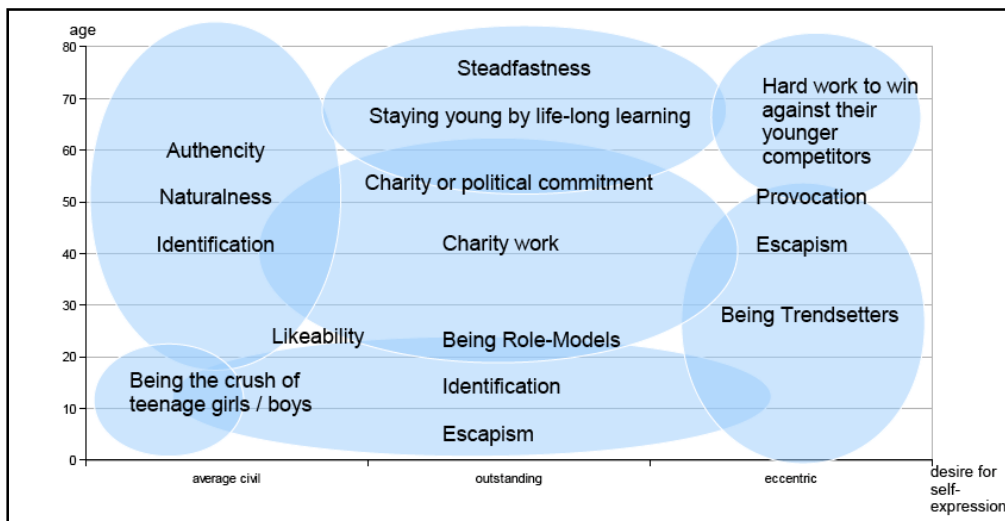


Figure 2 Key Factors of Successful Personal Branding

Source: Gursch/Gursch/Ternès 2012

6. Conclusion

Personal brands seem to be completely different to each other, strongly individual, but there's even more than an overlapping between categories. Besides the criteria, which were the indicators to be involved in the survey there are some key factors, which each cluster in particular has. The most successful brand is a performer of something, a container of something valuable and an identity myth, which is in a move and addresses an acute contradiction in society: be different with a clear story, perform and move. And behind this is trust a very important topic—the key for the start, the development and the long term increase of a brand.

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