

Personal Branding for the Business Professional



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You are not special. You are not a beautiful or unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everything else. - Tyler Durden, Fight Club.

[Gary Vaynerchuk](#) could tell you that his personal brand is worth millions, but he's modest. My friend and [PodCamp](#) co-founder, [Christopher S. Penn](#), often refers to branding by ZeFrank's definition: "an emotional aftertaste." I have some thoughts on how one might develop a strong personal brand online, and what you might do with one, once you build it.

Why Build a Personal Brand?

You might already know the answer to this question. There are lots of answers, actually, depending on you, your needs, the way the world has shaped you. Let's look at just one answer.

The easiest answer is that you might want to be memorable, and you might want to transfer your real world reputation into the online world. A strong personal brand is a mix of reputation, trust, attention, and execution. You might want to build a brand around being helpful (what I hope my brand means to you), or being a creative thinker (Kathy Sierra, for instance) or being a dealmaker (Donald Trump), or being a showman (David Lee Roth), or whatever matters most to you, and also what you are capable of sustaining.

A personal brand gives you the ability to stand out in a sea of similar products. In essence, you're marketing yourself as something different than the rest of the pack. Do you need this? I don't know. Do you like to be mixed in with the pack?

Hints About Brand In General

What's the difference between Coke and Pepsi? There's a taste difference, for sure, but what does the brand signify? Tricky, eh? So what's the difference between TechCrunch and Mashable to you? I would argue that Michael Arrington is more heavily tied into the Silicon Valley insiders scene than Pete Cashmore, but that Pete is much more positive overall. I think the other authors on the site are very different from each other (I really love Mashable's Mark "Rizzn" Hopkins, for instance).

Remember that trying to develop a personal brand involves differentiating in a Coke vs. Pepsi, TechCrunch vs. Mashable world. Identifying yourself as the social media expert or the tech geek blogger is about as differentiated as brands of rice.

In some ways, the differentiator on brands is in what you deliver. What differentiates me from others might be in the volume of useful content I deliver. I'm not sure. You tell me what makes me different. My answer would definitely vary from yours.

The Human Side of Brand

First off, remember that branding isn't playing a role. Be yourself. It will become apparent rather quickly if you're being someone that you're not. Gary Vaynerchuk is the same guy, camera on or off. He may or may not tone himself down a bit when meeting new business partners, but I promise you that he reverts to being himself the moment someone's come to know what he's about.

Second, you may choose to use some kind of alias, because you're afraid of the Internet and stalkers. That's great, except that your brand equity doesn't stretch to potential jobs, unless you go around explaining that you have a secret identity. As a guy who grew up reading comics, I'm okay with people having identities, but remember: that means the equity doesn't transfer as simply.

Finally, brands are complex and not especially one dimensional. Don't try to be a one-note experience. Madonna has much more than one brand element. So does Guy Kawasaki. Don't whittle yourself down to a simple footnote. Be complex and colorful and interesting. Only, be sure you can say what you're about in one easy sentence, and that others have a sense of what you represent without your help. Madonna is a creative force of emotion. [Guy Kawasaki](#) is an innovator and experimenter.

The Technology of Brands

My friend and interactive media strategist [Adam Broitman](#) calls Google a "reputation management system." I love it. Essentially, what Google knows is what's true, as far as the uneducated are concerned. So, how does Google come to accept you as the authority on something? There are a few measurements to that at present.

- Inbound links from other sources - if someone is linking to your website, you must have information of value, especially if that someone who's doing the linking is important.
- Outbound links to quality material - this is actually more for human love, but certainly helps prove that you're a lively presence.

- Readable, searchable pages - if Google can tell what you're talking about at your website, you probably are trying to offer something to the world.
- Constantly updating content - Google values freshness over staleness (don't we all?)
- Listed in directories - Google wants to know that you've submitted your site for inclusion in the more prominent search engines and website directories.
- Mechanical quality - Google has a lot of other things it values, like well-written websites that follow standards, and it's a little bit of learning to understand them all. Hubspot makes a free [Website Grader](#) tool that would help you understand a bit.

That's what Google cares about, and that's how a lot of people are searching for you. But we do this for humans, because humans are who make the decisions. So let's look into what counts for your strong personal brand technologically, with humans in mind.

But How?

Branding one's self in an online environment built on entropy and go-baby-go is difficult at best, and impossible if you forget to take your happy pills. To that end, I've come up with a quick list of 100 things you might do to help with these efforts.

Listening

- Build ego searches using Technorati and Google Blogsearch
- Comment frequently (and meaningfully) on blogs that write about you and your posts
- Don't forget the conversations hiding in Twitter (use [Summize.com](#)) and [Friendfeed](#). Be sure to stay aware of those.
- If you can afford it, buy professional listening tools, like Radian6 or others in that category.
- Use [Google Reader](#) to store your ego searches.
- Use Yahoo! Site Explorer to see who's linking to your site.
- Use heat map tools like [CrazyEgg](#) to see how people relate to your site.
- Listen to others in your area of expertise. Learn from them.
- Listen to thought leaders in other areas, and see how their ideas apply to you.
- Don't forget podcasts. Check out iTunes and see who's talking about your area of interest.
- Track things like audience/community sentiment (positive/negative) if you want to map effort to results.

Home Base

- Home base is your blog/website. Not everyone needs a blog. But most people who want to develop a personal brand do.
- Buy an easy-to-remember, easy-to-spell, content-appropriate domain name if you can. Don't be TOO clever.
- A really nice layout doesn't have to cost a lot, but shows you're more than a social media dabbler.
- Your "About" page should be about you AND your business, should the blog be professional in nature. At least, it should be about you.
- Make sure it's easy to comment on your site.
- Make sure it's easy for people to subscribe to your site's content.
- Use easy to read fonts and colors.
- A site laden with ads is a site that doesn't cherish its audience. Be thoughtful.
- Pay attention to which widgets you use in your sidebar. Don't be frivolous.
- Load time is key. Test your blog when you make changes, and ensure your load times are reasonable.
- Register your site with all the top search engines.
- Claim your site on Technorati.com
- Use WebsiteGrader.com to make sure your site is well built in Google's eyes.

Passports

Passports are accounts on other social networks and social media platforms. It's a good idea to build an account on some of these sites to further extend your personal branding.

- Twitter.com is a must if you have a social media audience. It also connects you to other practitioners.
- Facebook and/or MySpace are useful social networks where you can build outposts (see next list).
- Get a Flickr.com account for photo sharing.
- Get a YouTube.com account for video uploading.
- Get a StumbleUpon.com account for voting.
- Get a Digg.com account for voting, as well.
- Get an Upcoming.org account to promote events.
- Get a del.icio.us account for social bookmarking.
- Get a Wordpress.com account for its OpenID benefits.
- Get a LinkedIn account for your professional network.
- Take a second look at Plaxo. It's changed for the better.
- Get a Gmail.com account for use with reader, calendar, docs, and more.
- Get a Discus.com account for comment threading.
- Get a FriendFeed.com account.

Outposts

- Build RSS outposts on Facebook. Add Flog Blog, and several other RSS tools.
- Build a similar outpost on MySpace, if your audience might be there.
- Make sure your social media is listed in your LinkedIn profile.
- Add a link to your blog to your email signature file (this is still an outpost).
- Be sure your social network profiles on all sites has your blog listed, no matter where you have to put it to list it.
- Make sure your passport accounts (above) point to your blog and sites.
- Use social networks respectfully to share the best of your content, in a community-appropriate setting.
- Don't forget places like YahooGroups, Craigslist, and online forums.
- Email newsletters with some links to your blog makes for an effective outpost, especially if your audience isn't especially blog savvy.
- Podcast content can have links to your URL and might draw awareness back to your content, too.

Content

- Create new content regularly. If not daily, then at least three times a week.
- The more others can use your content, the better they will adopt it.
- Write brief pieces with lots of visual breaks for people to absorb.
- Images draw people's attention. Try to add a graphic per post. (Not sure why this works, but it seems to add some level of attention.)
- Mix up the kinds of pieces you put on your site. Interviews, how-to, newsish information, and more can help mix and draw more attention.
- Limit the number of "me too" posts you do in any given month to no more than three. Be original, in other words.
- The occasional 'list' post is usually very good for drawing attention.
- Write passionately, but be brief (unless you're writing a list of 100 tips).
- Consider adding audio and video to the mix. The occasional YouTube video with you as the star adds to your personal branding immensely, especially if you can manage to look comfortable.
- Brevity rules.

Conversation

- Commenting on other people's blogs builds awareness fast.
- The more valuable your comments, the more it reflects on your ability and your character.
- Use your listening tools to stay active in pertinent discussions.

- Try not to brag, ever. Be humble. Not falsely so, but truly, because a lot of what we do isn't as important as saving lives.
- Ask questions with your blog posts. Defer to experts. Learn from the conversation.
- Be confident. Asking for external validation often is a sign of weakness.
- Good conversations can be across many blogs with links to show the way.
- Try never to be too defensive. Don't be a pushover, but be aware of how you present yourself when defending.
- Disclose anything that might be questionable. Anything, and quickly!
- Don't delete critical blog comments. Delete only spam, abrasive language posts, and offensive material. (Have a blog comments policy handy, if you get into the deleting mode.

Community

- Remember that community and marketplace are two different things.
- Make your site and your efforts heavily about other people. It comes back.
- Make it easy for your community to reach you.
- Contribute to your community's blogs and projects.
- Thank people often for their time and attention.
- Celebrate important information in your community (like birthdays).
- Be human. Always.
- Your community knows more than you. Ask them questions often.
- Apologize when you mess up. Be very sincere.
- Treat your community like gold. Never subject them to a third party of any kind without their consent.
- Knowing more about your competitors' communities is a useful thing, too. Learn who visits, why they visit, and how they interact.
- Measuring your efforts in building community grows out your brand as a natural extension.

Face to Face

- Have simple, useful, crisp business cards to share. Always.
- Be confident in person.
- Clothes and appearance DO matter. Wish they didn't, but they do.
- Have a very brief introduction / elevator pitch and practice it often.
- Ask questions of people you meet. Get to know them.
- Don't seek business relationships right off. Instead, seek areas of shared interest.
- Know when to walk away politely.
- Don't try to meet everyone in a room. Meet a half dozen or more great new people.
- Never doubt that you are worth it.
- If you're terribly shy, consider finding a "wing man" for events.

- Doing homework ahead of time (finding people's most recent blog posts, googling them, etc) helps one feel "in the know."
- Make eye contact. It's MUCH more powerful than you know.

Promotion

- Use Digg, StumbleUpon, Del.icio.us and Google Reader to drive awareness.
- Promote others even more than you promote yourself
- Bragging isn't useful to anyone besides your own ego
- Linking and promoting others is a nice way to show you care about people
- Don't digg/stumble/link every single post. Save it for your very best
- Another promotional tool: guest blog on other sites
- Another promotion tool: make videos on YouTube with URL links
- Another promotion tool: use the status section of LinkedIn and Facebook
- Try hard not to send too many self-promotional emails. Wrap your self-promotion in something of value to others, instead.
- Sometimes, just doing really good work is worthy of others promoting you. Try it.

Elements of a Personal Brand

Personal empowerment is something near and dear to my heart. When I finally woke up from the realization that I didn't want to be a corporate worker drone (robots are evil), I realized that I didn't know the first thing about what to do to change my fate. It took a series of efforts, none of which were easy, but that have led me down a path towards doing what matters to me, being valued for what I do best, and finding friends and supporters along the way who understand me, and who have mutual interests.

Because YOU might be in a place where you're wondering what to do next, or because you might want to know more about what it's taken to go from being a guy in a cube named Chris Brogan to a guy people know and want to talk to, here are some elements of personal branding to consider. Your mileage may vary, but maybe these will spark your own ideas, and maybe you'll share them in the comments.

Here are some elements of a Personal Brand

Self Esteem First

Absolutely nothing I do would work if I hadn't worked long and hard on my self-esteem. In my case, I read a bunch of motivational books that got me started down the right path, but my self-esteem didn't get better until I read (and did all the work inside) a book by Dr. Matthew McKay simply called Self-Esteem. It taught me a lot about how to

observe and identify the things I was doing in my head to scuttle everything I wanted to accomplish. The more I learned, the more I have been successful over the last year.

Be Yourself

My friend, [Jon Swanson](#), has a great series of “8 things” going on. In the post I linked above, Jon’s 8th tip for increasing stress was “Try to be Chris Brogan if you are built to be Jon Swanson.” It’s really important to be yourself in building a brand. Coke never set out to be just like somebody else. Madonna didn’t try to be someone different. The brands we know and love work because they are their own identity.

In the world of the Internet, with “me too” applications abound, branding is often superfluous, if everyone just figures you’re just like someone else.

Offer Value

Brands stand for something. I don’t buy Apple because the cool kids buy it. I’ve had Apple products since 1983. I buy them because they’re easy to use, they work, they’re designed for my style.

Your brand needs to offer a value. Top of his game in the brand of strategy for the web right now? [Jeremiah Owyang](#). Even before he took his new gig at Forrester, Jeremiah has written amazing papers (blog posts), and given them to his readers for free. Why? Because he already knows about the new ROI (Return On Influence). An up and comer to get into is [Louis Gray](#). He’s adding value daily.

For you, consider WHAT you offer, and consider it hard. If you’re not providing a great “product,” and that can be a service that you do for the world, why should I care about your brand in the first place?

Build a Destination

This comes first in giving people a way to reach you, to see you, to know what you’re about. In this case, I mean giving people a website (preferably a blog), a phone number, an email account, a twitter account, a LinkedIn profile, and a Facebook profile. At minimum. Maybe you need other portals, but here’s a good starting point. Tie these things together. Show people how to connect to you at each of these. Why? Because you’re building out a way for people to get to know more about you, to reach you, to let you be there.

Destinations are so Web 1.0, which is why we added in Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Folks should be able to find your brand and interact with it wherever THEY are. Optionally, you can add an IM client, but I find that when I'm on Instant Messenger, I don't get much work done.

Join the Conversation

Cliche as that sometimes feels, it matters. Start sharing your ideas. Write from the heart. Speak from the heart. Show people where your passions lie. Help others solve their problems. Listen to what others say and instead of saying, "Yeah! Me too," try saying back something of added value. Comment all over the place and give people a sense of who YOU are.

Superstar in this department lately: [Connie Bensen](#). She's really lit up the scene fast, and is definitely someone with good opinions and ideas. I feel the same about Ben Yoskovitz of the [Instigator Blog](#). He's someone with a great value-add sense to what he's doing out there.

Innovate

In a world full of people doing somewhat similar stuff, the person who innovates is definitely ahead of the game. Come up with new things all the time. The other day, I posted on Twitter a quick blurb that Dave Winer was a scout while the rest of us were trail guides. This meant that Dave is out there trying and doing new things all the time. It's not good enough for a new, strong brand to be out there showing people the path from where everyone is to where everyone might go next. What gets really important is when you are DEFINING the path.

Doing something new is a great way to get people to be interested in what you do.

Be Responsible

A little while back, I went through a rough patch of not delivering on things I said I would do. I still dig out from that from time to time. Being reliable is a cornerstone to your brand. If you stop being reliable, it doesn't matter that you're a good person, or interesting, etc. It matters that you're helping people get something done. Execute. Repeat. Execute.

The more you can be responsible, the more your brand will matter.

Your Own Company

Inside my head, I'm the CEO, project manager, and administrative assistant to my own private company. Employees= 1. With this in mind, I look at every job I take as a project. I look at every project as an opportunity. I talk to everyone professionally as if they're someone looking to partner with me and my company. This helps me frame everything I do.

I don't think in terms of resume, at least not the way most folks think. Instead, I think about projects that matter to me. This is why inside my last company, I moved laterally a lot of the time. The titles didn't matter (the more you learn this, the better your life becomes), but instead, the experiences mattered.

Also, learn to look outside the walls of the organization you're with. NOT so you can leave, but so you can understand how your role works in more dimensions.

These things have worked wonders on my personal brand.

Build and Learn Constantly

I'm reading all the time. I learn about things from people all the time. The more you build your personal ability, the more your brand can offer. Learn from all the sources that matter. Read great books. Subscribe to excellent blogs using a good reader like Google Reader, and learn how to absorb information that matters to what you're passionate about.

The more you learn, the more you can offer back. Keep it consistent with your idea of who you are and what you want to offer the world, but be creative, and constantly strive to make your brand more useful and valuable to others.

Communicate Well

Not just communicate, but do it well. Learn how to blog in a way that people will read what you say. Learn which of your posts are going to do WHAT for your audience. Communicate verbally. Sign up to speak at places and learn how from organizations and individuals who take presenting seriously. Pay attention to how professionals speak, and learn from what they show you.

Always strive to communicate in a way that delivers the payload of your information up front, that makes it all direct and to the point, and that can be taken as a value.

Passion Drives Personal Brand

Thinking and Planning Passion is what fuels the best of what we do. It's that tireless drive to do something that we feel matters that will bring us forward in so many ways. [Whitney](#) is passionate about helping parents understand (and feel more comfortable with) learning disabilities. [Jon](#) is passionate about connecting with communities to provide spiritual guidance and observations from simple life. [Gary Vaynerchuk](#) is passionate about wine in ways that startle first time observers of his show. A key to your success in life is to find and enhance this same passion.

Passion is Rarely Aligned with What is Popular

A bunch of years back, I talked to Ingrid Lucia and the Flying Neutrinos. They're calling themselves a jazz band, but they do New Orleans style swing jazz. When Swing hit really hard in the US, they rode the wave, but they'd been doing swing for YEARS before folks came out to see them. Now that the wave passed, they're still doing what they're passionate about, and it still sounds great.

If you're in the current wave, ride it, and that's cool. But don't seek out something to do based on the wave. My best advice in this regard is that sometimes that which you're passionate about can be made to align with what's currently interesting to the world. But don't fake it. It just won't last, and your own brand will suffer along the way.

Passion is Hard to Fake

Authenticity matters. Most people can sense authenticity without a lot of effort. They can also sense when you've one astray from what truly matters to you. So be true to your passion. And here's a thought on that: if you suddenly are very much NOT passionate about something, think about moving on to that which does have your passion and attention. I've certainly changed what matters to me over the years. I was VERY into fitness and nutrition in 2004. You can go back on my blog archives and see me talking about the right mix of carbs and protein, when to hydrate, etc. Back in 1997, I wrote passionately about writing fiction. Don't fake passion. Move on.

Something to think about here: it's okay to move on from what you were passionate about, even if that's what defined your entire brand. You can seek a sideways move that shows a tangent back to your passion, or you can start over again. It seems daunting, but it will pay off in the end.

Passion Includes Mistakes and Failures

Never worry about doing something wrong, going afoul, pissing people off. Don't SEEK to do it, but don't be afraid of it. How can you create passionately if you're worried about going outside the lines. Make mistakes all over the place. Don't TRY to hurt people's feelings, and most especially, admit when you're wrong, apologize, try to be friends again, and keep going. I seem especially skilled in pissing friends off. My friend, Christopher S. Penn has said many times over the last year, "We have to take Brogan everywhere twice. The second time is to apologize." He's right.

But with people, you try really hard to rebuild where you step on toes, piss people off, etc. With business, if your passions hurt something, try to recover and see where it all goes.

Life doesn't have a do-over button, and you learn really quickly who gets mired in the past and who's focused on making the experience of the present and future better. Focus on those who understand the latter. History is there to learn from, but not to obsess over. Make mistakes. Apologize. Repeat. And grow from your passion.

Passion Means Helping Others See It

I guess you can be wildly passionate without sharing, but what's the fun in that? I tell people when I speak at events that I want their guidance and input because if I wanted to just talk with myself, I can do that any day of the week. Passion is best expressed when it's shared with others.

Want to see someone really passionate? Talk to Michael Smolens about [dotSUB](#), his translation project/software. Michael brings you into his frame of reference, whether or not you were even talking about language. Talk to [Jeff Pulver](#) for more than 10 minutes and see if you don't land on any one of Jeff's 3,891,774 passion land mines. The man is FUELED by passion.

Share your passion liberally. Be the [C.C. Chapman](#) of your own passions! This man makes shows and shows and shows and blogs and more shows about what drives him, what turns him on, what matters. Emulate C.C. and you won't be too far off.

Passion Requires Work and Thought

There's a really important point to consider: just talking about things all the time isn't exactly the same thing. You've gotta get in there. You've got to try things, experiment, do new things, work with others, HELP others, and share your thoughts and ideas then. Suggest new things, and then see if you can try them out. Work on something in the lab, and then show it to the world outside. Know who has a cool lab? [Bill Cammack](#). How about [Bre Pettis](#)? Experiment, do new things. Try stuff.

Passion Isn't a "Me Too" Game

There's only one Bill Belichick, coach of the New England Patriots. Believe me, I've heard this man during three different SuperBowl victory conversations talk about what his team could've done differently to make the game even better. He says it with love of his team, and with a drive to hold them responsible for what they're doing out there. Bill believes that his duty to his team is to keep them focused on playing the best game they can place. You RARELY see him smile. And yet, you know he's passionate in ways humans rarely exhibit.

Be yourself all the way to the core. And trust that what's unique and inherent in you is what people will want and why they've sought you out in the first place. Finding your own unique notes is tricky, and takes a little bit of work, but once you get those notes, play them loud and proud.

I'm a really big fan of cover songs. (And if you like them, too, subscribe to [Coverville](#)). Why do I love cover songs? Because it's amazing when artists play someone else's song in THEIR style. I love it. Don't be a cover band because you're not original. Play covers because they show off your uniqueness against someone else's original style.

What's Next?

That has a lot to do with you. Are you looking to build your brand to better your company's exposure in a space? Or are you seeking to establish yourself as a solo act? The strategy has to come from your goals, and your actions will come from that strategy.

Personal branding is a topic that has been around for a while, but one that has become much more prevalent in recent years. Why is that? Partly, it relates to how the Web has become our workplace, our water cooler, and our social mixer. It's hard to convey as much information online as we do in person, or so we believe. It's my hope that this ebook was helpful in providing you some ideas for building your own personal brand.

Please share this wherever you'd like, provide you share it for free. If you choose to blog about it, please use this link to point people to where they can get their own copy:

<http://www.chrisbrogan.com/img/broganbranding.pdf>

If you like what you've read here, and you want to keep current on all the new information I'm putting out for free every day, please consider [subscribing for free](#) to my blog. The goal of the site is to empower you with information on building digital relationships for business (though several nonprofits use the information equally well).

Thank you again for your time and attention. I'm happy to answer any questions you have, or provide more information.

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