

Branding your career

Fiona Pathiraja and **Judy Taylor** introduce the concept of a personal brand and discuss how to use it to enhance your career prospects



When asked to name cola flavoured drinks most people will think of two—Coke and Pepsi. These both have a strong brand identity and have staked a claim to the minds of their audience. People, however, can also benefit from having a personal brand.

A personal brand has been described as a blend of abilities, strengths, interests, and experiences that are unique to an individual (box 1).¹ Developing your brand involves appraising yourself critically and identifying your particular skills or unique selling points. Your brand determines how other people see you and influences their expectations of you, and it should be nurtured, developed, and promoted.

Personal brand: positive or negative?

Everyone has a personal brand—it's what others think of when they hear your name, and it's how they interpret their first impressions of you and your reputation. It is important to remember that personal brands can develop without any input or effort. Consciously constructing a brand, therefore, enables it to be used to your advantage (box 2).

A positive personal brand can enhance your career. A negative brand, or at least one that is perceived negatively, can be a considerable barrier to personal development. For example, if people see you as a joker or as the life and soul of the party it may be socially advantageous, but if it is the sole characteristic that identifies you

it could prevent you from being taken seriously. Your positive personal brand will allow you to be seen as someone who is honest and who has integrity. It will have an impact on your capacity to get the job you want, on your career development, and on your evolution as a leader.

Job applications and career development

The product you are selling in a job application is yourself. Doctors, however, often find it difficult to sell themselves successfully. They tend to concentrate on what they see as the evidence that proves that they are the best person for the job—their qualifications, experience, and publications. Although these are important, they are not enough to ensure success in a competitive environment. Developing your brand and unique selling points will help you differentiate yourself from other applicants. To do this you must focus on your strengths and understand how they will benefit your prospective employer.

When you are being interviewed you need to focus not just on what you say but also on the way you present yourself.² Albert Mehrabian's work on verbal and non-verbal messages in communication shows that the non-verbal elements are particularly important for communicating feelings and attitudes (especially when there is ambiguity or incongruence). He believes that our processing of interpersonal communication is divided into three elements—55% body language; 38% tone of voice; and 7% words.²

It is particularly important that during

Box 1 | Key points of a personal brand

What a personal brand is about

- Self awareness
- Authenticity and personal integrity
- Congruence
- Developing your unique selling point
- Helping you to gain a competitive advantage

What a personal brand is not about

- Being aggressive
- Doing the hard sell at every opportunity
- Becoming a caricature of yourself or presenting yourself in a false manner
- Limiting your skills to those within your brand

Box 2 | Changing your brand

"General surgery is a male dominated world, and achieving success is challenging for female trainees. It is not uncommon to find consultants whose attitudes are set against women, and who believe that too many of us give up surgery to enter general practice when the going gets tough. In my experience, consultants have been more encouraging of male senior house officers and would often invite them, rather than me, to interesting cases. Realising that my personal brand could be hindering my learning and career progression caused me to start making changes.

"Self scrutiny is never easy, but I realised that although I am competent, intelligent, and capable, my style of clothing and manner around the ward made me less likely to be taken seriously. In fact, other teams often mistook me for the social worker or speech and language therapist. I consciously decided my personal brand would be one of competence and efficiency. As such, the wrap dresses and large jewellery were soon replaced by shirts and trousers with minimal jewellery. What was harder to relinquish were the cups of tea and chats shared with the ward sisters. However, these interactions were unfortunately causing the male surgeons to view me as an outsider.

"The surgeons' attitudes did change towards me, and with time they started to view me as a serious contender for specialist registrar training and were happy to support my applications for a competitive training programme. As an ST5, I feel fortunate to have recognised the importance of a personal brand at an early stage in my career. It is empowering to be able to project an image of capability and competence. This is not to say that I have changed my personality; I still enjoy dressing up and having a frivolous chat—the difference is that I now understand how to ensure these don't impact on my colleagues' perceptions of me."

—Specialty trainee year 5 in general surgery



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interviews these three components support each other. This kind of alignment is also necessary in developing all of the other aspects of your unique selling points and your brand. Furthermore, if you are applying for a job in an organisation that you are currently or have previously trained or worked in, your unique selling points and brand should echo people's experience of you.

Leadership

The value of a personal brand has been recognised by leaders such as Barack Obama and Rudy Giuliani, who use their brand as an asset. Medical leaders who have inspired you will most likely have had a strong brand essence or identity. Their brand identity functions as a form of shorthand that enables an audience to understand who they are, and what their values, aims, and expectations are. It helps to build relationships, to negotiate, and to influence others by gaining their confidence. To develop their brand, however, leaders must first be self aware and conscious of their impact on others.

Personal brand development

How do you begin to develop your brand? Imagine you are an independent contractor employed by your trust—what would be a short and snappy phrase that would best describe you on your business card?

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- Dr Mark Smith, Best Care for Your Heart
- Ms Emily Hewitt, Passionate about Patient Safety
- Dr Johan Soloman, Putting Children First

On a recent leadership course, a group of 20 trainees were asked to think of three words that best described them. This request was met with some awkwardness and deliberation—after all, it is challenging to encapsulate yourself in just three words. The trainees managed to identify their unique selling points more easily, however, when they answered 10 questions:

- (1) What are your personal values?
- (2) What are your assumptions about people?
- (3) What drives you?
- (4) What are you naturally good at?
- (5) What are you proud of?
- (6) What is different about you?
- (7) What are your goals and ambitions?
- (8) Where do you want to be in 10 years' time?
- (9) How do people see you?
- (10) How do you want to be seen?

It might be useful to ask other people these questions about yourself. When you have generated enough material,

try to integrate the information you have gathered, ensuring that it is coordinated and honest.

As well as helping you to identify what you add to your organisation, this exercise can also allow you to understand where you might be lacking in impact and enable you to start implementing changes to address this (box 2). After you have started to market your brand, it is essential that you review and maintain it to ensure consistency.

The concept of a personal brand is one that evolved in the corporate world. However, it is equally applicable to a medical career. In wintry economic times for the NHS, the self awareness that comes from a personal brand can help you in the pursuit of that training number or consultant post.

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- 1 Connell S. *Personal brand essence*. Management Books 2000 Limited, 2009.
- 2 Mehrabian A. *Silent messages: implicit communication of emotions and attitudes*. Wadsworth Publishing, 1981.

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