



Managing Yourself



A New Approach to Building Your Personal Brand

How to communicate your value to the world **by Jill Avery
and Rachel Greenwald**

A New Approach to Building Your Personal Brand

How to communicate your value to the world **by Jill Avery and Rachel Greenwald**

From the Magazine ([May–June 2023](#)) / Reprint [R2303L](#)



Lulu Dubreuil

Much of professional and personal success depends on persuading others to recognize your value. You have to do this when you apply for jobs, ask for promotions, vie for leadership positions, or write your dating profile. For better or worse, in today’s world everyone is a brand, and you need to develop yours and get comfortable marketing it.

Personal branding is an intentional, strategic practice in which you define and express your own value proposition. And though people have always carefully cultivated their public personas and reputations,

online search and social media have greatly expanded the potential audience for—and risks and rewards associated with—such efforts.

Unfortunately, while we'd like to think that we're in complete control of our personal brands, that's rarely the case. As Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, is quoted as saying, "Your brand is what people say about you when you're not in the room." It's the amalgamation of the associations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and expectations that people collectively hold about you. Your goal should be to ensure that the narrative created about you is accurate, coherent, compelling, and differentiated.

A strong, well-managed personal brand benefits you in several ways. It enhances your visibility, particularly among those who matter to you and to the things you hope to accomplish. It can also help you expand your network and attract new opportunities. And on a deeper level, the process of building one can help you uncover, celebrate, and share the unique abilities you bring to the world.

We—a branding thought leader and a professional matchmaker and dating coach—have come together to map out a personal branding process that draws on the latest academic research on branding, brand storytelling, and brand management, as well as on decades of practical experience helping people craft their professional and personal images. Our hope is that this article will give you the guidance you need to create a personal brand that you can comfortably and authentically live into each day to achieve your most important goals.

A Seven-Step Process

Our approach involves seven steps, each of which informs the others as you move from strategizing to testing to tweaking in response to feedback.

1. Define your purpose. First you need a long-term vision and mission. What difference would you like to make to the various audiences that are important to you, personally and professionally, and what values would you like to embody as you do so?

Start by identifying your “through line.” Think about your significance to others, which is embedded in your past experiences, decisions, and actions. Ask yourself *how* and *why* you have lived the life you have, and look for any consistent interests, competencies, or character traits that could also lead you into the future. Then explore how they connect to your mission, passions, and goals by writing a personal value proposition, a statement with four components: the group you will target, what you hope to provide, your competitive cohort, and your distinctive capabilities. Here’s a template:

For [a particular target person or group of people]...

I will make a difference by offering [the unique, memorable, and meaningful value you want to provide]...

Among all [the other people also vying to make that difference, whom you would like to both fit in with and stand out from]...

Because of [the skill sets, personality traits, habits and tendencies, prior experiences, social capital, cultural capital, and credentials that will allow you to credibly deliver].

For example, an IT professional’s proposition might be “For a prospective employer, I’m the best cybersecurity manager to hire among all the applicants because of the multiple industry certifications I’ve earned and the strong leadership and perseverance I developed as a Division I college athlete.”

2. Audit your personal brand equity. You need to identify and analyze the brand you are today so that you can fruitfully build on or shift it to stay true to your personal proposition. Think about the raw material you have to work with, including awareness (what people know about you), associations (their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about you), and meaning (the stories they know and tell about you).

First, catalog your *credentials*, such as your education, significant professional or personal experiences, and achievements. Then outline your social connections and relationships within various groups and organizations. That will help you gauge your current level of *social capital* and understand and leverage it. Next, analyze your *cultural capital*—the expertise you’ve developed through your upbringing, interactions, hobbies, and interests that allows you to operate smoothly in different milieus.

Then make a list of adjectives or descriptive phrases you think capture the real you, including both positive and negative ones. Be as specific as possible and avoid simple descriptors, such as “University of Michigan graduate” or “financial analyst.” Brainstorm descriptive language that will distinguish you. For example, maybe you’re a “detail-oriented financial analyst” or a “financial analyst who sees beyond the numbers.” And ensure that all your adjectives sing: Instead of “smart,” try “intellectual,” “well-read,” “educated,” “street-smart,” or “expert at cost-based accounting.” Similarly, “funny” might become “quick-witted” or “good at lightening the mood with a well-timed joke.”

Finally, evaluate whether your self-assessment lines up with your desired brand identity. For example, if your personal value proposition relies on your being a strong leader who is warm, empathetic, and able to deliver results, you’ll want to see words like “compassionate” and

“results-driven.” How well are you exhibiting and showcasing those attributes?

Another important exercise here is to do some market research to find out if your take on your image rings true for others. Begin by identifying your key audiences (for instance, colleagues, bosses, teachers, family, friends, romantic partners) and selecting several “truth tellers” from each group—people you trust to give you objective feedback. Enlist some people who know you well and some who barely know you at all. Be brave enough to also include someone who has rejected you (say, for a job or for a date).



Lulu Dubreuil

Invite each person to spend some time with you openly discussing your strengths and weaknesses and assure him or her that you’re looking for complete candor. Then ask open-ended questions, such as “How would you describe me to a stranger if I wasn’t with you?” or “Which adjectives or phrases do you associate with me professionally and personally?” Don’t give leading prompts like “Do you think I have a good sense of humor?” Instead try “Is there anything unique about me in terms of my conversation style? Personality? Interests? Experiences? Skills?”

You can then get more specific. Ask your truth tellers to rate you on your desired attributes. Compare their opinions with your own. How do they align or differ? What gaps have you identified, and how might you fill them?

Remember, too, to assess yourself against the “competition”—on your own and with help from your advisers. What skill sets, credentials, social capital, cultural capital, and personality traits do those people have? Which attributes and benefits are unique to you? Those will become your points of difference. Which things are missing from your portfolio? They’re the things you need to work on.

3. Construct your personal narrative. A brand is not just a jumble of descriptors floating in the minds of other people; it’s built on the meaningful stories that you’ve communicated and that your audience has processed. You need to identify, craft, and refine the narratives that will communicate your brand. Think about times when you have felt most authentic, alive, positive, and productive; when you have stood out from others; when your uniqueness made the difference between success and failure; and when you’ve fully embodied the brand you want to have.

When an interviewer says, “Tell me about yourself,” don’t just recite your résumé or even describe your brand attributes. Instead, you should share illustrative stories about yourself and your experiences. For example: “In all the positions that you see on my CV, I’ve really played one role—problem-solver. Most recently, my team was struggling with an outdated review process, so I spent the past month working with a colleague in IT to revamp it, and we’ve since increased on-time completion rates by 100%.” Similarly, your answer to a conversation starter like “Where are you from?” could shift from a simple “New Jersey” to “A very rural part of New Jersey, where I spent my childhood hiking mountains and building campfires. How about you?” This is a way to show that you’re adventurous and resourceful without explicitly saying so.

Your personal value proposition becomes more memorable, resonant, accessible, and persuasive when you convey it with stories.

4. Embody your brand. Each social interaction can move your personal brand closer to or further from your ideal. In casual conversations, at parties, in job interviews, people are forming opinions about you whether you like it or not, and consciously or subconsciously, you're advertising yourself.

It's therefore important to be aware of the messages you're sending. Consider how you answer a simple question like "How are you?" to a colleague you see in the break room. If you reply, "I'm exhausted, work is stressful, and traffic was terrible," you're communicating mundane and negative vibes and missing a chance to reinforce appealing aspects of your brand. If you instead respond with something more intentional, such as "The commute wasn't great this morning, but I used the extra time to listen to a really interesting podcast on creativity that I'm going to share with the product launch team," you signal your positivity, productivity, and desire to learn.

Of course, with colleagues and friends who know you well, you don't need to manage your brand in each interaction, because they already have a well-formed (and we hope positive) opinion of you. But when dealing with people you don't know or whose perceptions about you might be incorrect, it's important to always put your best foot forward. That doesn't mean being constantly chipper and braggy. It's more about understanding the needs of others and what you can provide them and then communicating that personal value proposition in the most compelling way possible.

You should also learn how to creatively introduce your personal narratives during first meetings, casual small talk, and formal career

conversations. Ask yourself, “What do I want to share about myself, and what’s the best story to illustrate it?” Then look for opportunities.

5. Communicate your brand story. The next step is to create a “media plan” that specifies the channels through which you’ll formally convey your brand to others. Contemplate how you can use *owned*, *earned*, and *paid media* to spread your stories. As in product or service marketing, the goal is to increase discoverability, awareness, and understanding with your audiences.

That might feel uncomfortable at first. Self-promoters and braggarts aren’t usually well-liked. But outlining what makes you valuable—and giving people shortcuts for seeing what you have to offer—is critical to your success.

Owned media include social media or dating profiles, professional and personal websites, and the organic audiences generated by any content you produce, such as podcasts, videos, blogs, books, speeches, and articles in publications.

Earned media include mentions in the public press; recommendations and ratings of your work on LinkedIn and other platforms; retweets, likes, and comments on your social content; and the introductions, referrals, and references that others provide for you.

Paid media include all the ways you increase your exposure by paying others to help you, such as hiring executive search consultants, who can present your personal brand to potential employers; signing on with speakers’ bureaus or agents, who can identify audiences ready to hear your stories at conferences; buying ads on social media to promote your content; paying influencers to market you and your work; and pay-to-play speaking engagements or publication opportunities.

Consider the mix of media you want to use and how best to leverage various platforms. Remember to tailor your tactics to your target audience and how those people consume media. For example, if you want *Fortune* 500 companies to hire you as an aviation consultant, asking an industry influencer to post on LinkedIn an aviation article you wrote for a trade journal will garner better results than a Facebook post about your visit to an aviation museum.

6. Socialize your brand. Personal branding isn't an individual exercise; you need other people to share your stories, thereby enhancing your credibility and helping you reach new audiences. So carefully identify which gatekeepers, influencers, promoters, and communities you might enlist to assist you on your journey.

Gatekeepers are people who hold the keys to your success and without whom you'll find it difficult to fulfill your mission. They might be admissions officers at your first-choice school, judges for an important award you covet, or search committee members for a role you want. The press often serves an important gatekeeping role because editors and journalists choose whom to feature or highlight in their content.

Influencers include people with specialized expertise, authority, social position, or personal relationships that enable them to sway others. They have active and engaged followers and can provide you with additional platforms for your stories. Their recommendations or ratings give you legitimacy. Even without their express endorsement, you benefit from mere association with them.

Promoters are actively invested in your success and help communicate your personal brand. They include professional mentors, recruiters, bosses, friends who will share their contacts with you, and acquaintances who will set you up on informational interviews.

Personal brand communities are online or offline groups, clubs, or marketplaces through which you can find people who share your mission and special interests or who seek the value you could provide. Trade groups, job boards, and alumni clubs are all examples.

Ask yourself how you can find allies in each of those categories. Once you connect with them, explain what your goals are and that you're hoping they can help you with a small request, such as inviting you to speak on a panel at an alumni club or putting your name up for consideration when a relevant committee is being formed. A straightforward request is often appreciated because your allies want to help you but often don't know how to begin.

7. Reevaluate and adjust your brand. Personal branding is an ongoing process. So you will need to regularly assess how your value proposition and narratives fit into your current professional and personal context and how they're being received, and then tweak them accordingly.

We recommend an annual audit to find deficits to rectify and strengths to build on. In addition to doing an objective self-assessment, you'll want to reengage your truth tellers to uncover what your current image is in the minds of others and then make sure that it aligns with your goals. For example, if you're being considered for a managerial position but learn that not everyone perceives you to be a strong leader, you might take a leadership training course, volunteer to head up a new project or task force, or take on relevant roles in your personal life, such as joining a nonprofit board.

A recent client, a seasoned chief marketing officer, was interested in obtaining a seat on a corporate board. However, without existing board experience, she was finding it difficult. So she joined a nonprofit board and served on the audit committee, working with external auditors

and leading the creation of an enterprise-risk-management dashboard. That helped her strengthen her personal value proposition: “Among all other prospective directors, I have the strategic experience and financial acumen to provide governance oversight and be a creative partner for the executive team, because I have worked for 20 years as a CMO and have managed the audit and enterprise risk activities of a nonprofit board.” She could now tell specific stories about her work that communicated her analytical abilities, strategic perspective, and facility with business financial statements.

• • •

The personal branding process takes work. But we know from research and experience that it will allow you to better control your professional and personal image and thus the success and impact that you can have in the world.

*A version of this article appeared in the [May-June 2023](#) issue of *Harvard Business Review*.*



Jill Avery is a senior lecturer of business administration and the C. Roland Christensen Distinguished Management Educator in the marketing unit at Harvard Business School.



Rachel Greenwald is a professional matchmaker and dating coach. She’s also an executive fellow at Harvard Business School.