



## Personal Branding & Employee Advocacy

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# Personal Branding

What is personal branding? Why are digital personal brands more important than ever for both organisations and professional progression? How does 'employee advocacy' help organisations?

## WHAT IS PERSONAL BRANDING?

The message you share about yourself and your brand should be consistent with the message that others are sharing about you.

'Personal branding' is the process by which you reinforce who you are and what it is that you stand for in both your personal and professional life. What you stand for is usually a combination of the skills, capabilities, experience and networks that you are in that make you uniquely you.

Creating a personal brand that effectively captures what makes you 'you' - both on and offline - helps you to differentiate yourself from others in your profession. If you don't proactively take the time to define your personal brand, others will simply do it for you. In fact, Jeff Bezos famously explained your personal brand as "what people say about you when you're not in the room".

## BRANDING IS NOT MARKETING

An online presence will not create your personal brand, it is simply a means of marketing it.

It is important to understand the difference between branding and marketing. Because the internet has transformed business marketing over the last three decades as digital personal branding becomes more common many have started to confuse brand strategy with marketing strategy.

It is helpful to understand personal branding as the why can we trust and rely on you and the marketing as the 'what' and 'how' i.e. the tactic used communicate the 'why'. Ultimately, people buy into the brand not the marketing.

## PERSONAL BRANDING ONLINE

Not leveraging or managing your online personal brand today is the quickest way to lose out on business and professional progression.

The mass adoption of the internet into daily life has hugely changed the way we share information; sharing is now everything. The new internet landscape is being driven by the growing population of digital natives and mobile-first generation – Gen Zers – who put great emphasis and importance on digital personalisation and having social presence and relevance online.

This is already transforming personal branding and marketing for both people and businesses. Today, personal branding is no longer reserved for famous people, public figures or CEOs; regardless of your age or career level, somebody is screening you online to quickly ‘click through’ to evaluate your personal brand. In fact, personal branding is almost synonymous today with having an online digital profile (e.g. social media) to present and market yourself.

According to CareerBuilder, approximately half of employers say they won’t hire potential candidates without some sort of online presence today. During their own search they are using their own intuition to identify and infer someone’s credibility and ultimately answer the questions: ‘can we trust you to do the job?’ and ‘are you relevant?’. Unsurprisingly, what employers find can have major implications for your professional progress. A strong personal brand is therefore more important than ever before, as the average person today changes their job every 2-3 years and freelancers, who heavily rely on their personal brand for work opportunities, will make up approximately 40% of the workforce by 2020.

## THE BRIDGING OF PERSONAL AND COMPANY BRANDS

Today many businesses are changing the way they market by personifying themselves online.

Brands have spent the last few years perfecting how to communicate on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. These platforms have provided important online channels for companies to promote their brands by forming ‘personalities’ on social media that emulate Gen Zers’ style of communication – both in terms of voice and tone - to increase their customer engagement.

Companies can quickly 'prove' their transparency and strengthen the bond between their brand and consumers online by mimicking an individual's style of personal branding. This has directly contributed to the user-generated content and personal brand sponsorship phenomena we are seeing online today; brands are tapping into their 'personal' online networks to promote their products and services by asking consumers to contribute creative input to marketing campaigns as well as sponsoring content put out by online social influencers', i.e. those with strong personal brands.

### A CEO'S PERSONAL BRAND IS LINKED TO THE BUSINESS' BRAND

As a business grows, the importance of the CEO's personal brand grows too and becomes strongly bridged with their organisation's brand and reputation.

Personal branding doesn't only matter for those looking to get hired or headhunted; business leaders and organisations also rely on having a strong, positive online presence as over half of consumers rely on it when they are deciding who to do business with or where to invest their money.

It is increasingly accepted that a CEO's personal brand and how they interact online is directly tied to the success and appeal of a company in a major way. A recent study found that nearly half (45%) of global executives directly associate their organisation's reputation to the reputation of their CEO from (Weber Shandwick 2017). This is because a CEO can leverage their personal brand to help their company attract and close sales with potential clients as well as manage their stakeholders and strategic partnerships; who they are personally ties in with the long-term faith others have in the company.

Similarly, in the B2C arena, large clients naturally look to the CEO's personal brand as a way to build their perceptions about whether the CEO can, given their background and who they are, successfully handle projects for them - irrespective of the company they work for. In similar fashion, a CEO's reputation plays an even more important role in attracting employees to a company (77%) as well as motivating them to stay (70%) (Weber Shandwick,2017).

## THE VALUE OF AN EMPLOYEE'S PERSONAL BRAND FOR AN ORGANISATION

If employees are perceived individually through their brands as credible, trustworthy and talented, then the organisation's brand value increases dramatically.

Today, it's not just the CEO's personal brand that matters for organisations; their reputations are communicated directly by their workforce to their customers who, in turn, perceive the personal brand of the company through the employees they interact with.

Although many traditional organisations are still wary of encouraging their employees (outside of their CEO) to promote their own personal brands; many of today's leading organisations already understand that whilst their employees form a 'collective' they each have their own reach. With unique skillsets and experiences that can form a plethora of strong personal brands, employees can be leveraged and transformed into 'walking advertisements' for their businesses.

When employees successfully brand themselves as experts in an industry, both the employee and the company can achieve significant benefits; they will have stronger connections and networks which increases resourcefulness, as they can generate more leads and ultimately do their jobs better. The same goes for employees that have raised their personal profile within their organisations; they break down communication silos and encourage stronger internal networks and increase efficiency.

Equally, if employees have weak personal brands and a lack of online presence then their external exposure and connections are likely to be limited; in turn, the organisation's potential to attract and retain more business, partners and customers becomes restricted and lags behind its competitors.

### GIVING A FACE TO A COMPANY BRAND WITH 'EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY'

If employees freely associate themselves with their organisations they can generate greater positive exposure and raise awareness for both their personal and companies' brands.

The power of personal branding for professional progression coupled with the trend in business brand personification online are not the only ways in which people and organisations are leveraging personal brands. Organisations today are going beyond user-generated content or sponsoring individuals with strong personal brands to promote their products and services towards 'employee advocacy' i.e. brand exposure through their employees' personal 'online assets'.

At its core, employee advocacy also helps to build employee ownership of their organisation as well as its products and services; by sharing their company's content, an employee can use their strong online personal brand to directly increase company credibility and influence to much wider audiences.

Social media, in particular, has changed the way brands utilize employee advocacy; with customers spending, on average, an hour a day on social networking sites, the reach of employees' online presence combined can go beyond a company's brand reach. Whilst a company may already have strong standing and reliability amongst their offline networks, 'people buy into people'; in fact, 84% of people trust recommendations from people they know (e.g. LinkedIn connections), compared with only 15% trusting recommendations directly from brands (Gartner, 2016).

### EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY BOOSTS PERSONAL BRANDING

Whilst people have individual goals for their personal brand and online presence; it's in both an organisation and the employee's interests for an employee to develop their profile, communications and connections.

An employee optimising their digital profile to highlight their business is a great way to raise awareness of their personal brands too. It helps employees to have an up-to-date social media presence by enabling consistent content sharing, which also improves their professional networking reach and influence.

These aspects support the building of knowledge and credibility into an advocate's personal brand by helping to endorse them as thought leaders in the eyes of their peers and online professional networks. When employees share content in which they add their own informed points of view about the industry they work in or on the topics and issues that affect it, it increases their reach and relevance and highlights their professional expertise.

Employee advocacy also fosters active social networking through online discussion and engagement. This in turn boosts the findability and relevance of an advocates personal brand profile by expanding their professional networks and online followers. These components help advocates to increase their career opportunities *whilst* supporting their company's growth through trustworthy brand promotion.

### IS EMPLOYEE ADVOCACY REALLY WORTH THE INVESTMENT?

**As consumers are changing the way they make investment decisions, focusing on employee advocacy now is more important than ever.**

Some organisations today still question whether employee advocacy plans are worth investing in to increase their brand exposure. Around 5 years ago before social media marketing became mainstream, many brands still had reservations about the benefits and value of social media, instead choosing to stick to 'conventional' modes of marketing. Yet today it's hard to imagine a successful company not having a presence on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram.

Although employee advocacy is still in its early stages, interest in employee advocacy has grown 191% since 2013 (Hinge Research Institute). With 64% of companies that have implemented formal employee advocacy programs attributing it with attracting new business and employees; it is not a coincidence that many of the most successful global brands already capitalising from social media are the same ones that have already begun investing in employee advocacy.



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