

The 9 Worst Ways To Brand Yourself

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Are you getting tired of all the content-less "content marketing" that pervades the internet in order to "brand" professionals as thought leaders? I know that a lot of the HR heads and CEOs I work with are.

They see this explosion of self-branding "lite" as insubstantial and overly self-promotional. And while the internet does afford everyone a platform to air their thoughts, when done poorly it can backfire and actually take away from your professional reputation and brand equity, instead of building it up.

Unlike a celebrity profile, an executive reputation or brand is forged when you truly stand for something and the totality of your work product, presence, writing, insight, and professional and personal actions support that stance. Whether it is as an A++++ player, a subject-matter expert, a breakthrough strategist, or an inspired leader, these are brands that are built up over time and execution, and validated by the opinions of others, including the media.

True content marketing is leveraging the unique ideas, expertise, opinions, and insight of employees not for the employees' sake, but to raise the reputation of their organizations. It is possible for corporate or non-profit professionals to successfully position themselves in public as thought leaders, but not for everyone and not in the wrong ways.

So, to help you avoid some of the pitfalls of over-self-promotion and under-delivery, here is my list of the nine worst ways to brand yourself in 2017.

1. Call yourself a "guru."

Words like "guru," "visionary," "pioneer," and yes, "thought leader," are *only* things others may call you; you can never, ever, say them about yourself.

A random walk through LinkedIn profiles will reveal an unending parade of self-descriptions that are guaranteed to turn off any mainstream potential employer. "Shaman" is my favorite worst self-description. After all, the descriptions you include about yourself on social media and at the top of your resume have to ring true to those who know you, and be believable to those who do not. Don't trigger the gag reflexes of your audience before they even meet you!

2. Be a "thought follower."

In fact, while everyone is posing to be a thought leader, there is precious little original insight out there. Most of what is promoted as thought leadership is really thought followership renamed. With the internet, it is easy to take someone else's ideas and pass them off as your own. But doing so, or simply parroting old ideas or advice and calling

them new, is sure to backfire.

The world DOES need courageous thought leaders, but if that is not your true identity, then find another one that honestly fits, and work on transmitting that as your “brand.”

3. Posture. Present yourself as too perfect.

Very rarely do you look your absolute best when you go on network or local TV: your hair is often a tiny bit mussed, your outfit slightly wrinkled, and you might be “glowing” from the hot lights. But if you’re well-spoken, smart, moderately attractive and put-together, have a nice manner, and have great things to say and observations to share, the interviewers will probably like you and so will the viewing audience. That’s real. And when the media outlet posts the interview on line, you will look real, and like a validated expert. Your brand will strengthen.

But some of the new content marketing videos that are done outside of the news media are too “constructed.” They almost seem filmed through a gauze filter, so that the person showcased looks flawless. But experts are rarely perfectly airbrushed. And airbrushed experts are not always trusted. So, when you appear that way, you can look posed, or at worst, posturing. Things are changing, but I don’t think they have changed so much yet that audiences will confuse a made-up media interview with a real one. Take care as to the image you project, and too perfect is almost as bad as not perfect enough.

4. Be superficial. Become the Kim Kardashian of self-branding.

Some online content marketing is one step away from click-bait. When there is a really good headline, but after the click there are only two vapid paragraphs that follow, the reader knows that there is no “there,” there. Some folks think that this kind of superficiality is all that is needed to create an on-line presence. And for a bold-face name celebrity, perhaps that is true. But, for those who wish to craft an air-tight, substantive professional reputation, more is better than less, and deep is far better than superficial

5. Use the “I” word too much.

It is always a delicate balance between being too “I oriented” in business, and not “I oriented” enough. The rule of thumb I’ve developed in coaching is that younger corporate associates or executives steer away from using the “I” word too much. And the same is true for non-profit executives. An “I-focus” doesn’t wear too well on them, and often seems inappropriately self-aggrandizing, when in fact at their level, their emphasis should be on the team, their contribution to the team, and “we.”

6. Use the “I” word too little.

However, at the higher levels of management, especially corporate management, acting too humbly assures that you won’t get credit for all that you do. Women, especially, can appear deferential and not powerful or leader-like when they do not use “I” and “me” enough in their speech. And that means they will get less money and fewer promotions than their counterparts who crow a bit more. Again, this is very difficult to get right. But

the higher you go, in general, the more credit you should take, while always acknowledging the contribution of your peers, subordinates, and bosses.

7. Don't seem dedicated to a higher purpose.

Perhaps we are entering into a new era of narcissism, and its public acceptability. But still, narcissism doesn't work well for the vast majority of professionals. For most, the sense that they feel there is a higher purpose to their work than just lining their own pockets or scrapbook is a very attractive and promotable one. Corporate bosses usually appreciate employees who put the company and its mission first, and have the ability to stay loyal, handle frustration and setbacks, and put themselves second occasionally.

8. Care too much about your brand and not enough about the brand of your organization.

In the same vein, even if you care very much about your brand, don't let it show. The most alluring trait is to appear effortlessly famous/attractive/successful/accomplished.

But in the world of work, it is seen as highly acceptable to work hard and care very much about the quality of your performance. It is not acceptable to be seen as someone overly interested in your brand, especially if it is at the expense of the brand of your organization. Make sure to put the vast majority of your "branding" efforts into the branding and marketing of your organization, and not yourself. Then you'll be the kind of employee who is promoted, celebrated, and valued.

9. Use one of the pre-packaged promotional scams that pretend to be content marketing.

Recently I got a call from some marketers who said they could have a famous former reporter interview me on crisis management, tape it, and then run the segment on Fox News and Bloomberg TV. The only catch – it would cost me \$20,000 and the segment would be shown on ad time they purchase on those networks, in weird time slots. Talk about pay-for-play, which has historically been seen as unethical and unacceptable in the area of personal branding. These scams have been going on for years, but today their salesmen overtly call the activity "content marketing," a perversion of the term.

There are lots of these "marketers" around to take advantage of our very human wish to be known, be seen and admired, and have a brand. Many of the variations embrace some form of ersatz, or fake, news. They pretend to interview you, and put the tape on YouTube, but without the imprimatur of a news publication, legitimate journalist, university, or TED, BigThink, Levo League, Brookings, The Heritage Foundation or another legitimate think tank.

Moral: All content marketing is not the same, and the quality of your exposure on the internet and social media is more important than quantity. If you do wish to build a bullet-proof, substantive “personal brand,” you can begin by turning each of these 9 don’ts on its ear...and doing the exact opposite. Then, slowly, steadily, and with a great deal of inventiveness and useful insight, you can create and burnish your authentic professional reputation...and an authentic reputation is as valuable as gold.