

## PERSONAL BRANDING. A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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*Abstract: Personal branding is one of the latest phenomena in the purview of branding. Identifying a unique promise of value of an individual, based on his personality characteristics and social skills will help to favourable positioning in the social relations that one has at work, in social groups and in personal life. Representing an emotional response to the image of a person, but based on rational arguments, personal branding has several purposes: to make the individual visible at work, desired by employers, pleasant in social groups in which one is working and increased access to new professional and personal development opportunities. Starting from the idea "know yourself to grow yourself" proposed by William Arruda, this study aims to contribute to the theoretical analyse of the personal branding concept, that has received more practical approaches than theoretical once. Therefore, we propose a journey to the scientific literature to provide a clear and consistent theoretical framework.*

*Keywords: branding, personal branding, self-differentiation, unique promise of value, new phenomenon*

### Introduction

The today's world is a competitive one. Competitiveness refers in this context to companies, goods and services and also to people. It refers to keeping a good job or earn the best one, the wanted one. To conquer the competitiveness and have the job and life an individual desire, one can call on personal branding techniques. It means adapting tools and techniques from corporate and product branding to a person's life, attitude and development. This, in combination with psychological personal development elements can help to better stand out in the social groups he/she is part of and to "position" him/her self as good as possible.

If we discuss personal branding it is worth to underline the fact that is a complex process that is developing together with concepts coming from the psychological area, such as: self-esteem, self-knowledge, social perception and personal introspection. At the same time, personal branding has been theorized also borrowing components from the branding area, such as: unique promise of value, self-differentiation, positioning or self-promotion. The nature of this study is exploratory, focusing on elements of the branding area. Psychological issues are not part of this work.

### Aims of the study:

Starting from the well-known idea of William Arruda *know yourself to grow yourself*<sup>1</sup> this study aim is to:

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the idea of "Know yourself to grow yourself" can be found here: <http://www.personalbranding.tv/career-distinction-personal-branding-step-1-know-yourself/>

1. Contribute to the quite poor literature, especially in Romania of the personal branding concept that has received more practical approaches than theoretical once. Therefore, we propose a journey to the scientific literature to provide a clear and consistent theoretical framework.
2. Second, to highlight the most important elements of personal branding attitude

### **Review of the literature of personal branding concept:**

The *brand* concept refers to those emotional aspects that links the consumer with the product or good that satisfies more than basic needs. According to the American Marketing Association (AMA) a brand can be “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. The legal term for brand is trademark. A brand may identify one item, a family of items, or all items of that seller. If used for the firm as a whole, the preferred term is trade name”<sup>2</sup>. More than that a brand incorporates those *physical and emotional connections and relationship* that a well-known product or service establishes with the customers. Another element is the *trust* that the client invests in the brand, that element that will make certain the client that the product can offer him full satisfaction. If we refer to the essence of a brand, we can resume to four elements:

1. A mix between tangible and intangible attributes,
2. Symbolized by a trademark,
3. Which needs performant management strategy in order to be competitive,
4. That creates great value for the business (Bogdan, 2010, 34).

Brands have become very appreciated by consumers because they like „to use such services which are familiar to them and which they can trust” (Iqbal, et.al. 2012). This is why brands are visible everywhere. Being considered a growing field, both in practice and in theory, the concept has been debated by many authors: Aaker (1991), Ries and Trout (2001), Klein (2002), Clifton and Simmons (2003), Neumeier (2006), Franzen and Moriarty (2007), Kapferer (2008), Wheeler (2013), Keller (2013).

Until recent years, the theory of branding was limited to the consumer-product relationship. But, with the amplification of the personal development phenomenon, it was also borrowed in this area, leading to specific personal activities and named *personal branding*. The scientific part of the personal branding concept is quite poor. The contributions of the authors are more developed on the application tools and techniques of the process and on the arguments for using it in gaining best options for a job and for a positive lifestyle. The practical part of this activity was and still „had been well practiced by various professionals on various grounds such as sportsmen, politicians, businessmen and musicians” (Shaker and Hafiz, 2014, 8). An argument for this applied approach can be the one related to the background of the authors, which often are personal branding professionals or trainers, and less from the academic sphere. However, because personal branding is part of the curriculum of universities around the world, there are some works that are worth to be mentioned. We underline that in this study, we decided to make a mix of academic and applied works. This is because in what we are concerned, just an academic address will not offer a complete overview of what personal branding is and can do for a person. Being such a dynamic and applied field, the experience of both theoreticians and practitioners will create a clear vision.

Traces of the idea of personal branding can be found in the *personal development* literature of Napoleon Hill (1937) in the book *Think and grow Rich*, which offered a new life philosophy, helping the individual to gain success both in professional and personal life. But,

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.ama.org/resources/pages/dictionary.aspx?dLetter=B>, accessed 9.05.2017.

other authors were pioneers of the topic. Tom Peters (1997) came with the idea that everyone can shape their personal brand. Peters was followed in this approach by Montoya et.al. (2002) who tried to show people how can they use their abilities and personality traits in order to develop to full potential in their career and personal life. Arruda (2003) also offered a good work on describing the personal branding process and arguments on way is it important to people. Schwabel (2009) suggested a 4 step process based on discovering, creating, communicating and maintaining a personal brand in an online environment.

Not neglected are the works of Rise and Trout (2001), well-known authors of advertising, branding and marketing who have adapted their *product branding positioning* idea to individual branding one. They proposed a new personal development approach, speaking about *positioning yourself and your career* and arguing that one can benefit by using *positioning* to advance in the career. Brooks and Anumundu described personal branding as „the deployment of individuals` identity narratives for career and employment purposes” (Brooks and Anumudu, 2015, 24). Bendisch et.al. (2012) are speaking in their work about *people brand*. The concept is similar to personal branding and describes the need of having a positive image of a CEO, an image that will influence the way the company is perceived, because of the *image transfer* that people make between the company and its owners.

Similar to them, more authors delivered researches about the way branding can be part of a daily life of a person. So, we can retrieve from Bendisch`s et.al. (2012) work the following opinions about people brand or personal branding: Rein et.al. (2006) developed a theoretical discussion about the way people can benefit of marketing techniques in branding themselves. Shepherd (2005) contributed to the literature with an examination of the basic elements of self-marketing and personal branding. The author identified elements facing education and ethical components of a personal branding strategy. Herbst (2003) gains relevant information in his research about people brand, people image, people brand management and premises about people brand. Woischwill (2003) brought evidence about the fact that historical characters such as Goethe can be considered a brand due to the fact that brand elements can be transferred to him. Behrendt and Panetta (2003) analysed David Bowie`s personality and social perception and concluded that he has a strong brand identity. Herzberg (2003) made research about footballers` and came to the conclusion that each footballer has the ability to become a brand. All this work can be considered evidence of the development of this new phenomena around the world.

### **Key elements of personal branding:**

In defining or describing personal branding, we might claim that there are as many definitions as authors or specialists. One point of view is, however, common to all: it`s central element is the *emotional response* people have to the name, image or values of a person. Creating a branding strategy to a person means offering to the public an opportunity to know and understand better that person and to generate the kind of emotional response that one would like others to have about him/her (Deckers and Lacy, 2013, 6-7). To identify *key elements* of personal branding, we have followed some descriptions of the process that literature used:

“A personal brand is the powerful, clear, positive idea that comes to mind when people think of you. It`s what you stand for, the values, abilities and actions that people associate with you. It`s a professional alter ego designed for the purpose of influencing how others perceive you and turning that perception into opportunity” (Hillgren and O`Connor, 2011, 21 apud Montoya and Vandehey, 2002)

“Personal branding involves defining who you really are, clarifying yourself [...] The benefit of this process is that you have to explore and express your own view of yourself and how you actually want to be perceived” (Wee and Brooks, 2010, 46, apud Gad, 2001, 171)

“Personal Branding involves managing your reputation, style, look, attitude and skill set the same way that a marketing team would run the brand for a bag of Doritos or bottle of shampoo. The idea is that you can develop a collection of symbols and associations with yourself, brand equity enjoys” (Wright, 6)

“Personal branding is the public projection of your personality and abilities in a configuration that furthers your unique career aspirations [...] Personal branding is connected to conscience and long-term strategic planning because you cannot make yourself personally visible towards others without possessing something that hints at, promises, and actually delivers something of value to them” (Horn, 2009, 3, 9)

The *key elements* of all description about personal branding refer to: positive values that a person has; abilities possessed by a person; actions he/she does; professional alter ego; influence of how others perceive an individual; opportunity to develop on professional and personal life; clarification of who a person is by self-knowledge; own view of ones-self; how one wants to be perceived in social contexts; reputation one has; style of his appearance, act, talk, write, skills that makes a person different and needed at a job; collection of symbols and associations with the personality of an individual; public projection of his/hers imagine; unique career aspiration; unique promise of value; long-term strategic planning activity; delivering value. They all refer to favourable branding efforts that each person can do with the purpose to explore his authenticity and get appreciation at work and in social life. Combining different psychological techniques a person can better understand the personality, the best skills, and potential he/she has and can work on getting the best of it.

Managing a personal branding strategy requires a big effort, a long time one. This is way authors were interested in favorable arguments for making the effort to work on a personal branding strategy. In this respect the viewpoint of Horn is meaningful: „persons who are able to establish themselves as a personal brand within or outside their organisation create a conduit that will carry them and their skill as far as their ambitions can reach” (Horn, 2009, 3). Horn adds that personal branding means to have „the ability to project one`s personality and abilities to others in a strategic context” (Horn, 2009, 3). The strategic context of Horn`s refers to the fact that building a personal brand takes time and is based on conscience and long-term view and planning. A personal branding strategy will always be a public projection of a self based on the personality, abilities and aspirations of a person. Another important aspect is that personal branding has not a unique recipe and requires continuous innovation (Horn, 2009, 9).

Personal branding emerged also because in the business world, people started to recognize the need to have a positive image and a personal brand identity, both in the online life such as social media (Labrecque et.al. 2010, 37) and in the offline one. This is why there is a growing industry of career and brand building professionals who are working for other to become better employees by adapting and applying marketing strategies from the business area to the personal identities (Brooks and Anumudu, 2015, 23). Being useful to everyone in growing

a business, advance in a career and in expanding social and personal network, personal branding becomes more and more attractive.

### **The universal objectives of personal branding**

Specialists working in the field have developed many ways to grow a personal brand. They also have established objectives that can be followed. Before talking about these objectives, there is the need to add that all personal branding strategies should start, in our opinion, by learning about the psychological elements that will help a person to self-knowledge, introspection, self-perception and social perception. All this will go on creating the brand on authentic personal values, characteristics and will lead to a better self-differentiation and positioning. Without knowing essential things about him/her and about the way is perceived by others, the individual will not manage to support the brand on long term. According to Deckers and Lacy there are *five universal objectives of personal branding*.

1. Discover one`s passion – which is fundamental in achieving the goals established. Having at least one passion, one can transform it in a job and work for developing a career
2. Talking about yourself – is the second objective of a personal branding strategy. The accomplishments a person has can be his/her`s best opportunities to make people generate positive emotions and want to work with that person
3. Tell a story about you – based on the vision about life, on personal values, on people that contribute to the development of a person and about all experiences that helped the development of self.
4. Creating relationships – that will lead to better opportunities for development of a career and personal life.
5. Taking action – is the last universal objective of personal branding and is about planning and acting each day for enriching experience and defining positive emotional responses about one`s image (Deckers and Lacy, 2013, 10-16).

Additionally, the basic of building personal branding, includes also writing an autobiography which one can use as a „sales pitch”. This can have different length: shortest (1 sentence pitch), shorter (a 100 word pitch) and short (250 word biography). All of the three must be based on best skills, passions, best career capabilities, self perception, best of one is. An example of autobiographical content by length can be seen as followers:

**Table 1: The length of the autobiography**

| <b>Shortest</b>   | <b>Shorter</b>   | <b>Short</b>   |
|---|--|--|
| I`m a former newspaper reporter trying to get into public relations | I`m a former newspaper reporter trying to work as a public relations professional. I worked for the <i>Pawtucket Times</i> as a news reporter for four years, as a sports reporter for another three, and then covered the business beat for six. I`ve been spending a lot of time volunteering as the PR director for our local Oyster Shuckers Rehab Centre and I wrote a book about Thomas Gardiner Corcoran, one of President Franklin Roosevelt`s advisors. | I`m a former newspaper reporter trying to get into public relations. I worked for the <i>Pawtucket Times</i> as a news reporter for four years, as a sports reporter for another three, and then covered the business beat for six. I also served as president of the Rhode Island Journalists Association and spoke at our annual conference about the growth of small-town media. In addition, I`m a part-time professional historian, and I wrote a book about Thomas Gardiner Corcoran, one of President Franklin Roosevelt`s advisors and part of his brain trust. Because it was a self-published book, I had to do all my own |



|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
|  |  | <p>PR work. I scheduled a series of radio and TV interviews, and the book reached Amazon.com's Top 1,000 for 16 weeks in a row, bumping some Twitter marketing book out of the ranking. Finally, I've been serving as the volunteer PR director for our local Oyster Shuckers Rehab Center, garnering us about \$100,000 in earned media.</p> |
|--|--|---|

Source: Deckers Erik, Lacy Kyie. (2013). *Branding Yourself. How to Use Social Media to Invent or Reinvent Yourself*, Second Edition, 2013, Pearson Education, Inc, USA, 25-26.

Montoya and Vandehey underline that the main elements of a personal brand are:

1. You – the person who communicates about herself/himself in order to give others the chance to know who that person is and what is he/she specialized in
2. Promise – of your one's value and the certainty that those promises will be met in the interaction with that person
3. Relationship – based on the attributes that will determine the positive or negative relationship with others and the influence one has in his working area (Montoya and Vandehey, 2009, 4-6).

Considering that personal branding is a *mix of reputation, trust, attention and execution*, Chris Brogan<sup>3</sup>, professional speaker and private coach in personal development, describes personal branding through 12 elements. Some of them are:

1. Self-esteem – the main aim of strong foundation of a personal branding strategy. Self-esteem is the evaluation that a person does about her/him. If one has a low self-esteem, will need to work on achieving a better one before starting to build a personal branding strategy
2. Offer value – identifying *what* one can offer to the social-groups in which he/she activates, will lead to a strong personal branding
3. Build a destination – it is important to show people how they can connect with a person. In today's digital world, it is easy to *build destinations* using email account, twitter account, Facebook profile, LinkedIn profile or others online tools.
4. Join the Conversation – by speaking and writing about original ideas, that will help other know and understand better a person
5. Innovate – originality and creativity must be one of the main concerns of a person how is working on his/her personal branding
6. Being responsible – by fulfilling all promises in order to be reliable
7. Your own company – refers to the fact that an individual with a personal branding aspiration needs to act professional regardless of context
8. Build and learn constantly - a continuous learning approach is essential
9. Communicate well – learning all communication (online and offline) skills will lead to better interrelation among social groups<sup>4</sup>.

The main elements and objectives of personal branding are not limited to those exposed in this study. Authors and especially professionals in personal branding have developed different

<sup>3</sup> Chris Brogan is a professional speaker and private coach in personal development. We found his work relevant for this study, even if is not quit an academic one. More information about him and his work can be found here: <http://chrisbrogan.com/>  
<sup>4</sup><https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B8dzSOLqkUswOWZIMWI2ODItY2ZkNi00ZThiLTg1YTktNTQxNzhjMmU0NjBh/edit>, accessed 9.05.2017.

ways of managing an authentic brand for a person, based on their own perception and experience with the topic. Worth to be mention is that the majority of them are relies on self-knowledge, self-esteem, good relationships and networking, innovation, constant learning and development, the best skills, passion for the work one does, responsibility, long term view and best communication skills both in offline and in online interactions.

### Conclusion, limits and further work

We have started this work from the idea that *personal branding* is one of the latest phenomena in the purview of branding. Identifying a unique promise of value of an individual, based on his personality characteristics and social skills, will help to favourable positioning in the social relations that one has at work, social groups and in personal life. Representing an *emotional response* to the image of a person, but based on rational arguments, personal branding has several purposes: to make the individual visible at work, desired by employers, pleasant in social groups in which one is working and increased access to new professional and personal development opportunities. In order to complete the above literature review, we can add some more items to support the idea of branding a person. Brands *grow organically* and need to send consistent messages constantly about a person. Brands are not rational, they are always full of *emotional charge*. Brands *demand absolute commitment* and need to be based on sheer persistence and repetition. And last, but not least, brand *always have an effect*, thus the work on personal branding need to be done in such a way to bring positive effects (Montoya and Vandehey, 2009, 15-16).

Being a theoretical work, this paper has as a main limit the fact that there were discussed mainly the opinions of the authors and specialist, the general public not being asked about the topic. The theoretical review also can be improved, adding more opinions and academic works. For further empirical results we intend to design a sociological research that will offer the perspective of the employees and the general public on the topic of personal branding. Beyond the less studied topic of personal branding, this theoretical overview was an exploratory one and has collected only data from secondary sources, such as research work and books published so far, in order to give a scientific contribution to the personal branding literature.

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