

# Take Charge of Your Online Brand

Building your professional image involves more than updating your résumé. Here's some advice for proactively branding yourself in today's digital world.

It's a Web 2.0 world, and information about each of us is prolific and readily available to potential employers. In the accounting and finance world, it's imperative that you know what that information is saying about you. If you aren't creating your brand, chances are it's already creating you.

The good news is that taking control of this information along with other traditional job-search tactics, such as networking, can impact your career profoundly and positively.

To establish your brand, answer the following questions:

- ◆ What are my strengths and weaknesses?
- ◆ What do I have to offer that's exceptional or unique from other candidates? What is my differentiator?
- ◆ What am I known for? What do I want to be known for?
- ◆ What are my short- and long-term career goals? Where would I like my next job to be, and what attributes will that employer will be seeking?
- ◆ Have I highlighted my advanced degree and/or certifications?

After conducting an honest assessment based on your answers, you should be able to develop a statement that's both authentic and appealing to a potential employer. This is your branding statement. Think of it as a personal mission statement, and use it as the ruler by which you measure your branding efforts. Remember to keep it simple—the more you try to communicate, the more diluted your message will be.

## Assess Your Existing Brand

Next, you'll need to assess the information about you that's already available online. If you've set up accounts with any of the various social networking sites, those are a great place to start.

Also, conduct a search on your name in various forms, including all of the nicknames you may have used in the past. Don't stop at Google. Search Bing, Yahoo, or even DogPile—a search aggregator that pulls from various other search sites. Use a variety of search techniques to be sure you find content that may be buried just under the surface. For example, try searching on a common misspelling of your name or using your name in conjunction with common keywords to check for

information you suspect may already be available, whether negative (“Jane Doe + misdemeanor”), positive (“Jane Doe + awarded”), or neutral (“Jane Doe + volunteer”). Many companies are performing these types of searches before making a hiring decision!

You'll want to update, remove, or disassociate any content that's inconsistent with your desired brand. For example:

- ◆ Revisit the entry-level résumé you posted years ago on Monster, CareerBuilder, or other job sites. While use of these generalist job boards can be minimally useful in your search, your profile is still active, so you need to be sure it's communicating the most up-to-date information about you. While you're at it, post a revision date within the text of your résumé so that it will be clear to all who view it whether the information is current.
- ◆ Use privacy settings for personal information as appropriate on social networks such as LinkedIn or Facebook. A word of caution, however: Nothing on the Internet is truly private.
- ◆ Remove and avoid posting, to the best of your ability, any content that you wouldn't want

According to research released by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) in April 2011, 56% of organizations frequently scan LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and other professional networking sites for recruitment purposes. Another 20% confessed that while they haven't previously done so, they plan to begin using social media sites for recruiting in the future.

your manager, potential manager, or even the folks who report to you to see.

- ◆ Be sure that content on LinkedIn and other sites matches information on your résumé (i.e., dates of employment, company names, titles, etc.).
- ◆ Your Facebook page can have a large impact on how hiring authorities perceive you. That picture of you and your friends at a beach party may not enhance your ability to score that opportunity with your next employer.
- ◆ Disassociate content that's inconsistent with or will dilute your brand. In other words, you can continue participating in the personal-interest communities you enjoy as long as they meet the above criteria. Also, consider using an alias instead of your real name for those forums to keep your forum identity separate from your professional one.
- ◆ Tighten up and manage your circle of "friends." Remember, you can often be judged by the company you keep.

### Create Content Consistent with Your Desired Brand

Going forward, measure every bit of content you post on the Web against the yardstick of your desired brand. If it doesn't promote your brand, then ultimately your brand won't promote you.

Here are a few ideas to help you get started:

- ◆ Join and participate in professional communities. Seek out the online communities of two or three highly relevant professional organizations. Join their network, add your name to their directories, follow and comment on their blogs, and even contribute content in the form of Web articles, if you can. With an audience of peers, timewise you'll get the most bang for your buck here.
- ◆ Create or enhance your profile on public directories such as Wink, Spoke, and ZoomInfo.
- ◆ Stick to professional networking. While social network sites like Facebook are fine, opt to spend the bulk of your time and energy with professional networking sites like LinkedIn if you're after career growth.
- ◆ Ask peers and colleagues to provide references and testimonials regarding your work ethic, quality, or knowledge and to comment on or share your blog content.
- ◆ Determine how much effort you're able and willing to commit to blogging. With more than 100 million Web authors on the World Wide Web, successfully managing and promoting a blog can be intensely time-consuming. If you feel you must share your professional insight, opt for a micro-blogging platform such as Twit-

ter. While this can still take a great deal of time and energy, the overall commitment necessary to maintain this type of content is far less than that of a traditional blog.

- ◆ Follow, comment on, and forward news from blogs, podcasts, and RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feeds. In particular, RSS feeds are critical to staying abreast of your industry, news about your company and its competition, and new jobs.

### Maintain Your Brand

Now that you've managed to successfully create and/or redirect your brand, be sure to stay in control by keeping your brand:

**Authentic**—Nothing is more powerful than actually being who you claim to be.

**Consistent**—Remember to continuously measure your Web content against your desired message. Publishing posts, pictures, or other content that isn't relevant will only dilute your message.

**Relevant**—The Web is dynamic and ever-evolving. Be sure to continuously revise, update, and renew your information so your brand can evolve along with it.

Again, in this Web 2.0 world, information about you is readily available to potential employers, and many of them are actively seeking it out to aid in their recruiting efforts. Embracing this trend by creating a brand that's consistent with your goals is vital to managing your career. **SF**

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