How is your 2011 career-management plan progressing?

The first of our six-part series on career management appeared in the January 2011 issue. Now, more than half the year has evaporated. What progress have you made to structure and initiate the actions necessary to build your competitive edge in the workplace?

The first three installments focused on building the pillars of an effective career management plan: networking, leveraging self-awareness (situational assessment), and skill excellence. In this issue, we’ll explore the fourth pillar: personal branding.

We’ve already explored building skills excellence and leveraging the soft skills of networking and self-awareness. Personal branding weaves these three components into a personal value proposition for the workplace. Your personal branding efforts will differentiate you with decision makers in the organization so you can become the candidate of choice for opportunities and assignments.

Building your personal brand the right way will let you make a positive impression on the decision makers in your organization and build your professional presence.

Personal Branding: Create Your Value Proposition

Essence of Branding

As accountants, we’re taught that, in principle, goodwill is the intangible value paid for an asset above the book, or pure, value. That intangible value, or branding differentiation, becomes the ongoing quality associated with the asset. Branding success means building value for the quality of your work and differentiating your future value potential.

No organization has a perfect career development and succession-planning process. Most decision makers view the organization from a distant, elevated platform. Even though companies promote the fact that they have a succession-planning process, it’s a hard fact that opportunities and assignments are awarded to people management knows, likes, and trusts.

Your personal branding efforts weave your soft and hard skills into a portfolio that establishes ongoing conversation about you within the circle of decision makers. Personal branding speaks to your unique selling points and values within the competitive landscape of all other brands and is often the source of first impressions for decision makers.

Every day we all see examples of personal branding efforts in the workplace. There are people who dress in a unique ways, behave in unique ways, and bring their crusade for a cause to work each day. This type of branding distinguishes and raises awareness but does little to speak to their quality of work and potential for future value.

Although personal branding is far more about substance than appearance, your appearance is still a very critical element of branding success. Appearance should communicate that you’re a positive fit with the company culture and that your presence, as viewed through the lens of the decision makers, can consistently be counted on to be appropriate. Branding based on unique appearance and behavior often requires a person to demonstrate a greater amount of quality work and substance in order to overshadow the first impression created by their unique dress and behavior.

Unique appearance and behavior usually won’t stand the test of time and will become a caricature rather than a lasting positive impression. Most companies have adopted business-casual dress environments, with some opting for casual dress on Fridays or even full-time casual. You should adopt the guidelines, fit into the culture, and wear clothing at

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the high end of the scale. Spend the extra money to buy good-quality clothing that demonstrates respect for the workplace.

Scott Adams, creator of Dilbert and author of many books on the workplace, noted in an interview that “as hard as it is to accept, dressing like your boss is still the best way to get ahead.” Weave in the lessons from the self-awareness pillar (March 2011) to evaluate how to maximize the impact of your appearance branding and fit in the company. Remember, most decision makers view the organization from a distance, and appearance is a large part of their first impression.

**Brand Your Work Product**

Weaving hard skills into your personal brand is essential to creating positive conversation around your analytical contributions. Each company has a style and format for written communication. How you format your work product is more important than what’s in your content because the decision maker will never appreciate the quality of what you’re contributing if he or she isn’t positively attracted by the presentation.

Master the slide formats, presentation style, and font characteristics your key executives are most comfortable seeing. Borrow and study old slide decks for format and style. Preview your work with key stakeholders in the organization where you will ultimately submit your material. Demonstrate that you value their input by reflecting the feedback in the final product.

Executives are more impressed with someone who demonstrates respect and value for their time by providing exactly what they need vs. someone who tries to impress them with volumes of information. Be concise and organized. State the issue clearly, and recommend a solution early in the presentation; then follow with an appropriate amount of detail and narrative. Always do a quality check of your work for spelling and word use, and be certain the little things that could derail you—like page numbers, dates, and confidential designations—are in place. Quality work that meets the analytical need and is formatted properly will always find its way to higher places in the organization than it was first delivered.

**Technology and Building Relationships**

In the Stone Age, pre-Internet corporate world, people exerted great efforts to make contact, gain an introduction, and ultimately earn an in-person opportunity to make a first impression. Now LinkedIn and Facebook have become the networking door openers.

Both internal and external decision makers immediately turn to your LinkedIn profile when your name crosses their radar. It’s far easier and safer for them to gain insight to who you are before offering in-person meetings to explore what you are. Then most will turn to Facebook to see if your personal profile complements how you portray yourself in your professional profile.

A good professional profile is built with vibrant, concise, and forward-looking wording. Your Facebook profile should complement your professional profile. We’ve all heard stories of Facebook pages that have torpedoed and sunk careers. Don’t be one of them. If you haven’t yet built your social network profile, read the first article in our series, then start establishing relationships with people who can be a resource to your career development.

The networking pillar (January 2011) requires you to build an influence map of key stakeholders. Use LinkedIn to get connected to as many of the key stakeholders and decision makers as possible. Don’t force yourself on a person who has a profile with very few connections. But a person whose profile and connections reflect openness to invitations is fair game to approach electronically.

**Building Personal Relationships Remains Critical**

Having a person as a LinkedIn connection is only a statistic. Keeping your name fresh with them is essential. This requires occasionally dropping a brief note to people on your connection list to bring them up to date on your professional activities, inform them of something interesting you read, or pass along a link for a site they might be interested in viewing.

It’s essential to build personal relationships with key stakeholders and decision makers. Be conscious of and take full advantage of each opportunity that might afford contact with a high-value target of career influence. Be
aware that technology has actually created major hurdles to break the ice, have conversations, and build relationships.

Relationships are built most successfully in small increments of interaction. Offsite meetings and conferences are key opportunities to gain access to high-value targets on your influence map. Breaks and common areas are the prime places to successfully interact with a high-volume target on your influence map. What do you see most people doing during breaks or when standing by themselves? They have their face buried in their BlackBerry or are texting on their phones. What does this communicate? They aren’t open to conversation and don’t want to be approached.

If you are staring at your BlackBerry or are texting, then you have a wall between you and others that negates the prime opportunity to be approached or initiate conversation where you most likely will pick up valuable nuggets of information that could open the door for building a relationship. So appear open and approachable. Initiate conversation while demonstrating appropriate courtesy. Remember, decision makers give opportunities to those they know, like, and trust.

When you’re attempting personal interaction with a key stakeholder or decision maker, respect the atmosphere and situation. Don’t force your way into a group or conversation. Use the lessons from your self-awareness exploration (March 2011) to understand how to leverage your personality strengths and make situational modifications to optimize results.

Attracting people who can help you succeed is critical to building your own brand. Your character—personal and professional—is defined by the sum of the five people you spend the most time with. Successful branding requires you to make choices. Surround yourself with people who can have a positive influence on building your character, and spend your time doing activities that lift you in incremental steps toward becoming who and what you want to be.

**Execution Is Even More Critical**
Change and excellence guru Tom Peters introduced “The Brand Called You” concept in 1997 in his writings that describe getting ahead in the corporate culture as the “Age of the Individual.” A huge component for successful personal branding is preparation for execution excellence when the opportunity presents itself to interact with a high-value target on your influence map.

There’s no replacement for hard work and effort in preparing for successful interpersonal interaction. Preparation requires study, planning, and practice. A three-minute conversation with a decision maker most often creates an unchanging view of your fit and potential. This may not sound fair or even logical, but it’s true.

Therefore, be prepared. We’ve all heard about having an “elevator speech” ready for the time when a decision maker unexpectedly opens the door to a relationship by saying “tell me about yourself.” Preparation and practice will make what you say smooth, concise, and polished. These critical introduction opportunities rarely arise in a scripted and structured way. Unpolished rambling during this career-critical three-minute window will require a ton of cleanup effort and can result in irreparable damage.

Learn how to execute for excellence to optimize the interaction opportunity. Be polite and professional. Stay away from questions that are personal and overly social. Let the high-value target ask the personal and social questions, then always gauge their ego factor before you answer. Executive ego will get ruffled if your answer migrates the conversation toward anyone but themselves. Be prepared to ask leading questions that are timely and relevant, and give answers that put the conversation back in the executive’s control.

**How to Play to Win**
The workplace is a very competitive environment where positive differentiation is critical to attracting the attention of decision makers. Don’t try to recreate the gold standard. Study what is working and excel at delivering to that standard through your personal branding efforts that draw from the other pillars of your career management plan.

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