

Build Your Personal Brand

IN FOUR WEEKS!

By Doug Arms

As a high-profile, global business leader, he's energetic, upbeat, and has a can-do attitude. He's highly entrepreneurial yet dedicates much of his time, energy, and capital to social, educational, and environmental causes. He's adventurous and not afraid to push the boundaries of what's possible in both the physical and business worlds. He utilizes social media to its fullest, and he prides himself on being accessible and engaging in conversations with everyone from politicians and pop stars to students and entry-level professionals. Who is he?

If you answered “Richard Branson,” then give yourself a high five because you’re absolutely right!

But stop for a moment and consider how you knew whom I was talking about.

The reason is that Branson has built a recognizable *personal brand*.

Sure, the Virgin Group is a brand. But Branson is his own unique self in the public’s eye: the ever-energetic, charitable guy who sails across oceans, floats around the world in balloons, and takes risks as part of everyday life. He’s the entrepreneur who isn’t afraid to dream big and do his best to make those dreams reality, even if it involves failing now and then (although the crash of SpaceShipTwo and the death of copilot Michael Alsbury were particularly devastating). And he’s the mentor who takes the time to interact with anybody who reaches out to him with a valid question or good idea.

Now imagine that the next time you apply for a job in the accounting and finance field, you could show the employer those aspects that make you uniquely suited for the position. You can do this by presenting your personal brand—one that demonstrates your expertise, skills, and qualities. In short, one that impresses, gets you invited to interviews, and, ultimately, lands you your next job.

Why You Need to Build Your Personal Brand

Your brand is being created whether you’re actively building it or not. Everything you do professionally, from the jobs you take to the attitude you project, contributes to your brand. Moreover, with an increasing number of employers vetting candidates via social media sites, everything you do online matters—and this isn’t limited to professional interaction.

That’s why you’re advised to take control of building your personal brand—one that supports your credibility. Difficult? Maybe. But where’s the fun if there’s no challenge?

In this article, I’m going to guide you through the steps you need to take to build your personal brand in just four short weeks. In week 1, you’ll learn what a personal brand is and how to define yours. In week 2, we’ll cover what your digital presence currently looks like and how to clean it up. In week 3, I’ll teach you how to streamline your online showcases to create a digital portfolio. And in week 4, you’ll learn how to network to strengthen your personal brand.

If you follow these steps carefully, you can propel your job search in the accounting and finance industry to a

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higher level of efficiency by communicating a clear, personal brand to hiring managers.

WEEK 1: Define Your Personal Brand

Before diving into how you can determine your own personal brand, let’s take a closer look at exactly what a personal brand is.

In short, your personal brand is your reputation. It’s that special combination of knowledge, skills, experience, and expertise that makes you unique and memorable in the eyes of others. When you get it right, it’s what makes employers want to hire you and other professionals want to work with you.

No matter where you are in your career, your personal brand matters because it’s a major factor in an employer’s decision-making process. Before hiring you, an employer wants to know whether you’re a good fit for the company’s culture, whether you consistently present yourself in a professional manner, and similar things. The same holds true if you’re looking for a promotion or a lateral move with more responsibility. Moreover, every employer knows that an employee who’s uniquely skilled in a specific field is a valuable asset. And the more valuable you are in your employer’s estimation, the better for your career.

But your employer isn't the only one who'll benefit from your strong personal brand. The more recognizable you are as a powerhouse in your chosen field, the stronger your foundation for your own future successes, no matter whether that's moving to another employer or becoming a recognized authority in your industry. (For more, see "The Definitive Guide to Building Your Personal Brand" by Jayson DeMers at www.forbes.com/sites/jaysondemers/2013/11/19/the-definitive-guide-to-building-your-personal-brand/.)

Now it's time to define your own personal brand. First, let's assess the qualities that contribute to your brand.

Ask yourself: "What do I want to do for the rest of my career?"

If you're building your career, you should be certain you're on the right track. It doesn't matter if you're an entry-level candidate aspiring to be a CFO—what matters is that right now you can define those aspects of your personal brand that will help you eventually get a corner office.

For example, let's say you're a financial analyst with a passion for the energy industry. You're fascinated by how local and global energy trends affect the value of portfolios and companies, and your dream is to become a senior portfolio manager with a focus on global energy stocks.

Next, list some of your qualities or accomplishments that you're confident enough about to discuss intelligently. Let's say you have a knack for predicting trends and, based on your recommendations, your employer has added significant value to some of its most important clients' portfolios. That's a pretty decent achievement and something you should definitely incorporate into your brand.

Now let's move on to an external assessment of your brand. Ask your colleagues, supervisor, and other people you interact with on a regular basis to describe you, paying close attention to the following aspects:

◆ **What descriptors do they use?** Take note of words such as "insightful," "strategist," "reliable," "motivating," "leader," and "dedicated."

◆ **How do they benefit from working with you?** For example, a colleague might say she learned from your expertise, or your supervisor might say your insights are invaluable when determining strategy.

Look for common themes in the answers you receive, and, where possible, select those descriptors that best align with your career objective.

Finally it's time to put all of these aspects together to

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create a truthful representation of you that highlights your strongest qualities and makes you unique and memorable. Using the previous example, this would be your personal brand: *Insightful, strategy-oriented financial analyst with proven expertise in the global energy industry.*

Congratulations! You've just defined your personal brand! And that means, from now on, everything you do and everything you put out there must align with your personal brand. But first, it's time to do some cleaning.

WEEK 2: Clean Up Your Social Media Pages

Your social media pages can be an asset or a liability to your career.

It's a reality of today's workplace that, despite potential legal pitfalls, employers might use your social media information to find out more about you during the hiring process. According to a 2013 CareerBuilder survey, 39% of companies use social networking sites to screen candidates. So whether you agree with this practice or not, the truth is that to brand yourself appropriately, you have to assume your current and future employers will look online to find out more about you.

Here's the good news: Almost a fifth of all hiring managers who responded to the survey agreed that information from a candidate's social media pages caused them to hire him or her. The most commonly cited points included that a candidate projected a professional image, displayed a well-rounded personality with a wide range of interests, demonstrated good communication skills, or had posted great references on his or her profile.

Unfortunately, 43% of all hiring managers said they had rejected candidates because of information they found online. Some of the main issues included inappropriate photos, evidence of alcohol or illegal substance abuse, criticism of coworkers or employers, and discriminatory remarks.

Clearly, social media isn't a place to vent your frustrations after a bad day at work or to post photos of that graduation bash you can't recall very well. Instead, it's a tool that—when utilized properly—can significantly

support your brand.

If you're worried that information about you on your social networking pages could have a negative impact on your career, it's time to take action. Roll up your sleeves and get ready because this week we're going to clean up your digital dirt via a three-stage process.

Find Out What's Out There about You

First, do an Internet search of your name. Remember, you want the results to support your brand. Here are some pointers:

- ◆ **Is your name unique and recognizable?** If it's commonplace, consider consistently adding your middle initial or profession. For example, if you're a financial analyst named John Brown and your middle name is Henry, consider using *John H. Brown* or *John Brown, financial analyst*.

- ◆ **Is your profile picture current, clear, and professional?** If not, consider replacing it with a professional headshot.

Scrub Your Posts

Be warned: This phase can take a while, especially if you've been very active on social media. But it's worth it to be sure the information about you supports your brand.

Scroll through your social media posts for anything that indicates unhealthy, inappropriate, or risky behavior, as well as for expression of strong opinions that could conflict with an employer's interests—any wording that might be unprofessional. As much as possible, hide any such information from public view by either changing the privacy settings on the post in question or removing it.

You can't always remove information about yourself when it's on other people's pages, so be prepared to clarify any incidents or controversial opinions that may affect an employer's business.

Monitor Your Presence

Nowadays, it's easy to monitor what new information about you appears on the Internet. Set up a Google alert (www.google.com/alerts) that sends you an e-mail when your name comes up in a new search result. If somebody posts something inappropriate about you, request that it be removed. On the flip side, when something positive is posted, you can highlight it on your own pages.

Once you've cleaned up anything that could compromise your personal brand, it's crucial that, from now on, you're professional and respectful in everything you post

publicly on social media. It's also advisable to show caution in how your personal presence overlaps your professional one. Don't blur the lines: Avoid mentioning your employer on your personal pages since that could have unfavorable consequences or, in some cases, even be against company policy.

WEEK 3: Create a Digital Portfolio

Now the fun part begins. In weeks 3 and 4, you're going to proactively put information out there that supports your personal brand and that makes employers want to contact you.

Your Digital Portfolio

Your digital portfolio consists of all your online showcases, including your social media pages, personal website, and, perhaps, your blog. The material in your digital portfolio should be consistent across all media and fully support your personal brand. Remember what employers are looking for: information that shows you're professional, credible, and a good match for the company. So next you're going to learn how to tweak your digital portfolio to show that you're the real deal. We'll start with your social media sites, paying special attention to LinkedIn, and finish with your personal website.

Social Media Sites

When it comes to Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Pinterest, Tumblr, and other sites where you have a public page, it's crucial that your profile is professional and consistent across the board. Keep the following tips in mind:

- ◆ **Make sure that the name and photo** you decided on in week 2 are those that you use on all the profiles.

- ◆ **State your job title** or profession clearly.

- ◆ **Check that the language** you use is grammatically correct and contains no errors.

- ◆ **Use keywords** in your description that pertain to your personal brand. In the example of the financial analyst, you would use words like "financial analyst," "energy industry," "strategic," and "communication skills."

- ◆ **Show that you're well rounded.** Though showing your professionalism is key, communicating other interests and skills that align with your personal brand will give employers more insight into your personality. For example, to support your knack for strategy, you could include your participation in a regional chess championship. Or to highlight your communication skills, you could list your position as editor of the student newspaper when you were in college.

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◆ **Post current photos** of yourself with colleagues at work-related functions, with college friends at alumni events, and with acquaintances at volunteer or sports events.

◆ **Vet your groups.** Being a member of specific groups can be a useful way to show you're well rounded, but make sure the groups pertain to your personal brand. For example, if your focus is on global energy stocks, you probably shouldn't be a member of a group that advocates against wind farms, no matter how strongly you feel about the matter. Of course, this is a very obvious example, but it makes the point that it's important to carefully consider the message you're sending to potential employers.

LinkedIn

Since LinkedIn is geared specifically toward professional networking, it's in your best interest to pay special attention to your profile and activities on the site. Use the same approach I just mentioned for your profile and

groups, and remember to make the most of LinkedIn's additional features:

◆ **List your work history.** Make sure the dates and job titles are accurate. Add short descriptions of your responsibilities in each position.

◆ **Highlight your top skills.** Even if you are multi-talented, list only those skills that are relevant to your brand and that other professionals can verify.

◆ **Request recommendations.** It's a good idea to ask those who can vouch for you professionally to write a recommendation for you or "endorse" you, highlighting those aspects of your personality and professional performance that support your personal brand.

◆ **Choose your interests carefully.** As a living, breathing human being, you probably have a whole range of interests. For your LinkedIn profile, however, it's best to list only those that support your professional qualities. For example, it's fine to list international chess championships and public speaking, but think twice about adding your passion for heavy metal music or BASE jumping.

Your Personal Website

Besides maintaining a consistent social media presence, it's smart to create your own website where you can put all relevant information together in a couple of easy-to-navigate pages. Employers want to know as much about you as possible, and on your own website you can create a nuanced representation of your brand without the limitations of standard profile templates.

There are a number of free or low-cost sites that allow you to easily create a small customized website, including Drupal, Weebly, and Wix. Look at some respected accounting and finance websites for inspiration. Here are some other aspects to note:

◆ **Include your contact details** or a contact form in a clear manner.

◆ **Include a downloadable PDF version** of your résumé.

◆ **Make sure your website is fluid** so it can be viewed on desktops, tablets, and smartphones.

◆ **Include a blog.** Your personal information is likely to remain the same, but you can showcase your expertise continuously by means of an ongoing blog.

If you spent this week streamlining your online showcases to create your digital portfolio, you know how much work goes into it. Don't let your work go to waste: Maintain your pages and sites, and make sure your information is always up to date.

WEEK 4: Strengthen Your Personal Brand

In the past three weeks, you've laid a solid foundation for your personal brand. This week, I'm going to teach you how to build on this foundation to create a powerhouse personal brand that attracts employers and enhances your reputation as an expert in your specific field.

In Person

Though we've concentrated on your online presence throughout this process, now we're going to step back into the real world and take a look at in-person networking.

- ◆ **At work.** Your current workplace is the single best point to start networking. Ask your colleagues to introduce you to other people in the organization, even if they're from different departments. Building relationships outside your specific division can be a good way to get noticed.

- ◆ **Professional organizations.** Networking events, mixers, and even lectures can offer great opportunities to expand your network beyond your own organization.

- ◆ **Alumni events.** Instead of regarding alumni events as reunions to reminisce about your college years, view them as opportunities to strengthen relationships with professionals you already know.

- ◆ **Volunteer events.** If you do volunteer work, conduct yourself as professionally as you do at work. You never know when a chance meeting could lead to an important connection or a pro bono project could become an accomplishment that gives you serious bragging rights.

Online

To make the most of online networking, you have to think like a strategist. LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, groups, and online talent communities offer overwhelming opportunities to interact, so it's imperative you invest your time and energy wisely in order to support and strengthen your brand.

Keep the following points in mind:

- ◆ **Be choosy.** Don't just randomly send out or accept invitations to connect to your network. Assess each potential connection carefully to see if the relationship could be mutually beneficial. If you believe it could be, send a personalized invitation with a brief introduction.

- ◆ **Participate in the right discussions.** To build your brand, it's important to stick to discussions that are relevant to it. Make sure you know what you're talking about, and always—always—be respectful.

- ◆ **Retweet and repost.** This demonstrates initiative and can help win support for your own posts from other people in your network.

- ◆ **Toot your own horn.** Make status updates to let your network know what you're working on, and always share your achievements.

- ◆ **Start discussions.** Write your own blog, start your own group, or initiate discussions within existing groups. But if you start a discussion, it's wise to monitor subsequent posts to ensure the conversation is relevant and respectful. If this seems like a lot of responsibility, bear in mind that in order to become an authority in your field, you'll need to bring original contributions to the table. Taking the time to initiate and guide intelligent and informed discussions can contribute significantly to your brand.

In General

Look for ways to expand your knowledge and skills, as well as gain the support of people who can help you advance. For example, you could enhance your public speaking skills by volunteering to represent your company at a conference. You could sign up for a mentorship program and be paired with an experienced CFO who can advise you on career-related matters. Or you could engage in a LinkedIn group discussion with a renowned pundit who's regularly quoted in respected publications. No matter what you choose to do, make sure your actions fit your brand, help you expand your knowledge and skills, and gain support for your credibility and expertise.

As you can see from this discussion, during the course of a mere month you can define your brand, project a credible online presence, and use that presence to network with others in the accounting and finance industry. By applying the principles we've discussed, you can strengthen your brand so that you become a professional whose expertise is valued by your peers and industry decision makers alike. Remember: You don't have to go to extraordinary lengths to prove your personal brand—you just have to define and express what propels you to be the best at what you do. **SF**

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