

"A UNIQUELY VALUABLE ADDITION"

The key to a strong personal brand is "leveraging your difference," says consulting strategist Dorie Clark

By Nathan Jaye, CFA

Are you respected within your industry? What do your peers think of you? What can you do about it? These questions are at the heart of the personal branding and reinvention process, according to Dorie Clark, a marketing strategy consultant and frequent contributor to *Harvard Business Review*, *Time*, and the World Economic Forum blog *Agenda*. She is the author of *Reinventing You: Define Your Brand, Imagine Your Future* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2013) and *Stand Out: How to Find Your Breakthrough Idea and Build a Following Around It* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2015). In this interview, Clark explains how to begin the personal branding and reinvention process, the importance of "leveraging your difference," the significance of finding mentors and validators, and how your career is "a story only you can tell."

You say everyone already has a personal brand. What do you mean?

Essentially, a personal brand is a synonym for your reputation. Everyone certainly has a reputation. When people think something about you, the real question is, "Is that what you would wish them to be thinking about you?" That's why it's essential for people to understand their personal brand and begin to take control of it.

Why is personal branding so important?

Unfortunately, most people can lose their jobs at almost any moment. That's actually what

happened to me at the start of my career. I was a newspaper reporter, and I got laid off about a year into my career. That began my understanding of the need for reinvention, because things that you think are solid are not necessarily so. Additionally, if you're operating in an entrepreneurial capacity, if you have your own business, your personal brand is what draws people to you. It's what causes clients to want to work with you rather than with someone else. It enables you to charge premium rates, because you are recognized for special skills or being the best at something.

Finally, having a strong personal brand, whether you're an entrepreneur or employee, is the way that your true talents can be recognized. Your personal brand makes clear what your unique contribution is and makes sure that other people recognize that. So, you'll have better access to the kinds of opportunities that you deserve.

How do you begin a branding or reinvention process?

First of all, you need to be really clear on your destination. That might seem obvious, but a lot of people lack clarity on this. They know what they *don't* want to be doing, but they're not necessarily sure where to move *toward*. Until you can fix on a goal, it's really hard to know what steps to take. Additionally, some people may have developed an overly rosy picture of what

their desired destination looks like because they haven't experienced it firsthand and they have a glamorized view. It's important to know with certainty that this is the direction you want to be moving.

To do this, I suggest people take their time and be deliberate in doing things, such as informational interviews with people at their company or in the niche that they're thinking of moving toward. Try activities that are sometimes underutilized, like job shadowing. If you're asking to shadow someone who is really prominent (say, a top leader in an organization), the person often will say yes, and you can begin to get a taste of what it's like to walk in those shoes for a day or a few days. That can help clarify exactly where you want to go. From there, you can work backward to determine the steps you need to take to execute that path.

How important is realizing how others perceive us?

It's definitely a key starting point. Since everyone has a pre-existing brand, it's useful to know where you're considered strong and, conversely, where you might have gaps. If you want to reinvent yourself to become a better candidate for a senior leadership role (you may have a perfectly good brand for someone at your level), perhaps focus on tactical elements or having a friendly personality.

If you want to create a C-level brand, you're going to need to emphasize certain characteristics that may not have gotten a lot of play. You need to perhaps be more charismatic or more visionary or operate at a more strategic level. The only way that you are going to know where you need to make adjustments is by getting a sense of where you are today and then making those tweaks to move in the desired direction.

It might be surprising how others see us.

Certainly. This is an area where almost everyone has major blind spots. It is incredibly hard for us to understand how other people see us. We have so much more information about ourselves than others do. They're only seeing a facet. It's the phenomenon sociologists call the curse of knowledge. We know about the inner workings of ourselves so well. It's very difficult to understand the big picture of how others might be viewing us. So, you need to ask other people.

How does the 360 interview process fit in?

A typical 360 interview process is something that's undertaken by many executive coaches if they're hired to work with you. It involves interviewing all the people around you, from your boss to your colleagues to your employees—all 360 degrees, like a circle—to try to get a comprehensive picture of how you operate in the company in general.

It's incredibly useful feedback, but not everyone's company is willing to pay for it. So I suggest doing your own life-hack version. I call it the three-word exercise. You ask at least a half-dozen people, "If you had to describe me in only three words, what would they be?" That quick hit of information is enormously valuable because it doesn't take long for people to do it and it forces them to really distill all of their perceptions about you down to the most essential. Very quickly, you'll begin to see patterns in what is mentioned by multiple people.



Dorie Clark

Give us examples of people who have reinvented their personal brand.

One example I like to cite is Angelina Jolie, who early in her career was known as a wild child. She would give interviews and talk about drug use or her sexual history. She had a famous necklace with Billy Bob Thornton's blood. A lot of people thought, "Oh wow, this woman is a little odd."

This is clearly somebody who needed to rebrand herself. So, in very smart and strategic ways, she began doing that. She became a goodwill ambassador [for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] and shifted the focus away from herself as a celebrity and focused instead on other people and helping people in need, which is a great way to rebrand. She adopted a number of children from different countries, which highlights the kinder, gentler elements of her personality. She's going to direct a film about atrocities in Cambodia. These are ways you can show people that it's not all about you and that you've changed.

What about someone in the professional sphere?

One person I write about in *Reinventing You* is a woman named Libby Wagner. I liked her reinvention story because it was very nontraditional. She was a poet who became a management consultant. She had a very difficult hurdle. She was afraid that if people found out about her past as a poet then no one would take her business advice seriously. Over time, she realized that her perceived weakness—the fact that she started as a poet and had all this experience and training in the world of language—was actually a source of strength. That's often the key to professional reinvention.

There will always be people who have more experience than you do because those are the people who have been doing the same thing from the beginning. If the criterion is

who has the most experience, you will always lose. So, you need to find ways to shift the discourse from who has the most experience to a different frame. For Libby Wagner, that frame was, “Who can best help you communicate in difficult situations?” It turns out a poet is actually a lot better equipped to do so than someone with a traditional MBA.

You call this "leveraging your difference."

Can you say more?

Broadly speaking, I believe we are exiting a period where what matters most is having the same credentials as everybody else. That used to be what was looked for and sought after. Did you go to the right schools? Do you have the right pedigree? Now, what is increasingly vital is how you are *different* from other people. That's going to be the source of your competitive advantage. That's how you are able to see the world differently.

So, if you can embrace those differences and be cognizant of how they give you a new perspective, that can be a very powerful force for you. It's not something you should shy away from. It's something that you should embrace, because a company does not need more yes men. A company does not need the 99th person who thinks the same way. A company needs someone who is going to see openings that no one else perceives and is able to seize those opportunities.

How do you turn your career into a story that only you can tell?

If you're reinventing yourself, some people are going to be confused. They're not necessarily going to understand why you are shifting industries or shifting jobs. When left to their own devices, they will either ignore the information (and it really won't register at all) or they'll come up with their own explanation, which is often erroneous and not necessarily helpful or flattering to you.

It is really important to make sure that you seize control of the narrative around your reinvention so people understand why you're doing what you're doing, that it is not a whim, and that it is not undertaken lightly. Instead, it is something that you are doing thoughtfully and you believe you have something important to contribute, because some people might say, “That's nice, but what on earth do you know about *that*?” You need to rebut those objections up front by making it clear how your past experience adds value to your new endeavor and, in fact, makes you a uniquely valuable addition.

What about skills? Should you go back to school or not?

The first consideration is: Are you required to go back to school? If whatever path you're wanting to take has a degree requirement or if you can't be licensed to do what you want without going back to school, then you obviously need to do it. However, if there's not a mandate that you go back to school, then the question you should ask yourself is, “What is the fastest, simplest, and most effective way for me to get the knowledge that I need?” Sometimes, it may be going back to school. Other times, it's not.

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You might also be able to achieve results by taking one course or doing classes on the internet. Or you could do an internship, which many people think is solely the province of college students but which I think is a totally legitimate option for mid-career professionals if they're looking to make a change. It could also mean volunteering and gaining skills through a volunteer board that you serve on or chairing a committee. Any of those are good strategies that should be explored before automatically assuming you have to go back to school.

How do you bombproof your online image?

In terms of your online image, the most important thing to remember is that it is much easier and better to take a preventative approach than wait until disaster strikes. Every professional now understands that you can't have stupid keg party pictures on your online profile, but what is less understood is that it's not just the presence of bad things that's a problem—it is also the absence of good things.

Employers and clients are looking online and they want to see evidence that you have built up a solid professional profile. If they don't find anything about you or they just find a few haphazard entries, then that's not painting a very convincing picture that you're somebody who is knowledgeable or serious about your field. Taking the opportunity now to create a powerful online image is really helpful because it's something that accrues over time.

One simple thing is having a well-filled-out LinkedIn profile. Ideally, you might also want to start blogging on LinkedIn, which is now very easy to do. Using other forms of social media, you could have a Twitter account or an Instagram account. As long as you are creating content that is targeted and professional, you can even bring in a personal element. That's fine, but you want the totality of your online presence to show your seriousness about the profession that you're operating in.

How important is finding a mentor?

It's fantastic if you're able to get a classical-type mentor, somebody who is in your field and very much like you but

10 or 15 years older and willing to guide you so that you avoid all of the mistakes that they made. It's great if you can luck into that, but those opportunities are actually very rare. If you just wait around for one to magically appear, you're probably going to be waiting a long time.

I encourage people to develop their own "mentor board of directors." Instead of expecting one person to be the perfect mentor and fill every role and teach you everything you need to know, you should identify a group of colleagues (anywhere from, say, three to eight) who have special skills or abilities that you respect. Don't think that you have to model your entire life after them; just focus on the skills that you would like to learn. Maybe one friend is really good at delegation and another friend is really good at public speaking. You can try to learn from them in that capacity. That makes the power of mentorship a lot more accessible to more people.

It's like assembling your own dream team of people that you would like to learn from. They could be older. They could be at your level. They could even be junior people. That's totally fine, because sometimes we can learn a lot from employees or even interns.

Who are validators, and what role do they serve?

Research has shown that it's better to have others do your promoting for you. If you are perceived by others as bragging or touting your own accomplishments too much, people tune that out pretty quickly. But, interestingly, if someone else is talking you up, if someone else sings your praises, people will listen and will be impressed, and they will begin to think quite highly of you.

We've all been in a situation where we get a lucky break and someone says something nice about us to our boss. One of the strategies I talk about is trying to find ways to accelerate this process, which you should do if you are in the branding process, where it's really important to manage your identity. You can find a "wingman" and take turns promoting each other.

Go to a trusted friend or colleague and make a pact with them. Say, "Look, at the next networking event or the next conference, I will talk you up if you talk me up." This is very symbiotic because the pressure of personal branding is off of you. You don't have to think about it as much or worry about it. They're going to handle it for you and vice versa. You can have confidence that your talents will be noticed and talked about. This doesn't mean awkwardly interjecting into conversations and fog-horning about your friend, but it does mean that in relevant situations you should be looking for opportunities to help your friend shine. If you find a person that your friend should really connect with, it's finding a way to say, "You should really meet her. Let

me bring her over." If the conversation turns to a topic where your friend has expertise, then it's useful to shine a light on her there and say, "It's interesting you're mentioning China. My friend just came back from a six-week fellowship there," and then that's her moment to contribute to the conversation.

When is the right time to launch a new brand?

You don't want to unveil your new brand until you're sure what it is. Sometimes, people get too excited about the possibilities and rush to tell everybody, "Oh, I'm reinventing myself. I'm going to change industries." Then a month later, they change their mind and they've lost all credibility because people say, "Oh, well, he wasn't serious at all." The next time you try to talk about your reinvention, people are going to be less likely to help you.

It's not that you have to keep it a secret for a really long time. But it's useful to have a little bit of expertise or content creation under your belt, so you can show people this is not just a pipe dream, this is something you're actually taking steps toward actualizing.

If you are looking to make a transition, when you start telling people about it, it's very helpful if you can say, "Well, I'm already taking a class in such-and-such and I've learned these new skills." Or you can say, "I've launched a blog about the subject. If you're interested, I can send you my first few blog posts." That way, it's not just you talking about a wish or a dream. It's you talking about something that is already in process, and they can see with their own eyes that you are committed to it.

How do you monitor an existing personal brand?

Once your personal brand is up and running, you want to keep it fresh and make sure that you are on the pulse and representing yourself well. One way is to turn to the mentor board of directors that you've assembled. Ideally, you have a mix of skills and perspectives and some degree of knowledge of your industry in this group. They can keep you up to date on trends, and you'll have people to bounce ideas off of and know that you're getting good counsel.

This is where it's also useful, certainly from a networking perspective as well, to build connections with the people in your industry. It can be very useful to go to industry conferences and stay abreast of trends so that you see what's out there and see the language that people are using to talk about things. What are the trends? What are the developments? You can ensure you're on the pulse.

Nathan Jaye, CFA, is a speaker on intelligence and member of CFA Society San Francisco.

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