

# Where Do You Stand on the Personal Brand?

*There is still a sharp division on the merits and validity of the personal brand. So what's all the fuss about?*

by Chip Hartman

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Image Credit: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/14/Mocking\\_Bird\\_Argument.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/14/Mocking_Bird_Argument.jpg)

Just imagine walking into a brandless supermarket. As you make your way to the canned fruits and vegetables aisle, you see shelf after shelf of colorfully labeled cans announcing items like “Fresh Arctic Snow Peas,” “French-Cut String Beans,” “Low-Cal Prunes,” and “Imported Diced Pineapple.” In addition to the attractive labels, a few of the cans have easy-open lids while others make claims like “700% of your daily CoQ-10 requirement.” But there are no company names, logos, taglines or recognizable markings. There is no way to tell who made these products.

Maybe you’ll enjoy your no-brand purchases. The diet prunes might have a delicate aftertaste. On the other hand, the French-cuts might taste like soggy cardboard. Whether the reaction is good, bad or neutral, your mind will record an impression of the experience. That enormous neural database will have one more record added to it.

Not to belabor the fiction, but you could just as easily imagine a Brandless Car Mart, a Brandless Shoe Outlet and a Brandless Electronics Depot. Do you think you’d be happy with purchases from these places?

Although we intuitively know why brands are an important part of our daily lives, we tend to assign their relevance to the consumption of everyday products and services. But the absurdity of a brandless marketplace might help us to re-consider the many ways in which **we** are routinely perceived as brands and how those perceptions can affect our careers or businesses.

## **Being a Brand vs. Having a Brand**

So what about people? Can people **be** brands? Yes, if they have the iconic visibility of Oprah, Tommy Hilfiger, Madonna, or Tiger Woods. These are individuals who ignite our imaginations, touch our hearts or even influence the way we view the world. Just hearing their names trigger strong mental associations with their celebrity stature. Their reputations precede them wherever they go.

Most of us will never know what it's like to be a superstar — the laws of probability are stacked mightily against it. For some, that's good news; for others, not so much.

But it would be a mistake to think that we don't **have** a brand. Each of us has an inner core of experience built up over time from our distinctive talents, skills and abilities. The net result of all the work we do, the value we provide, and the creative output we share builds an aggregate *public perception* of us — which we generally refer to as our reputation. It tells others who we are, where we fit into the mosaic of 21<sup>st</sup> century commerce, and the potential value we offer by having a relationship with us. So although most of us can't get away with referring to ourselves as a brand in the same way we use the term for Madonna, each of us nevertheless **has** a brand — in the context of having accountability for that reputation regardless of its status at any given moment.

## **Brand vs. Branding**

Most people don't go through life obsessing about their brands. They realize that whatever the aggregate public perception of them happens to be, they do not control it — simply because no one can control what's in someone else's mind. The brand is the overall perception that others have of you; it is not the perception you have of yourself.

**Branding** is a different story. Branding is the execution of discrete tasks intended to improve the public perception ... things like engaging in social media conversations, creating interesting content to share with others, keeping one's networking activities in high gear and demonstrating a genuine enthusiasm for helping others. So while you have no direct control of your brand, you have total control of your branding efforts — or lack thereof. When you stop to think about it, branding is really the ultimate form of respect for your own reputation, a desire to continually monitor the prevailing winds of public opinion and put a dedicated effort into giving it the best possible polish.

## **A Different Perspective**

There are quite a few people who don't buy into the concept of humans *as brands* or *having brands* at all. Among the more forceful arguments on this side of the fence is the notion that "human-based branding" is nothing more than putting a hyped-up veneer on an otherwise lackluster personality. According to this view, it's impossible to fake authenticity (how true!) and you do a great disservice by representing yourself as something you're not. No one likes to hang out with people who are disingenuous.

For those who wish to learn more about this view on the matter of people having brands, there is an article written by Mr. Olivier Blanchard (dated January 3, 2012) entitled [R. I. P. Personal Branding](#) in which the author basically takes a meat cleaver to the entire concept.

Where, when, how and why did this personal brand ruckus get started?

## **The Birth of the Personal Brand**

Someone who gave this issue a great deal of thought back in the mid-1990s was [Tom Peters](#). In 1997, Peters wrote an article entitled [The Brand Called You](#) (published in the Aug./Sept. edition of [FastCompany.com](#)). It quickly became the cornerstone for the paradigm of being the "CEO of Me, Inc." — the mind set which casts the employee in the role of Chief Executive Officer of his or her own career and the one person ultimately responsible for its success or failure.

What bothered Peters was that corporate employees were gradually becoming nameless, faceless *commodities* – not much different from those nondescript canned goods on the store shelf – and were quickly losing the traction they needed to compete in a new and increasingly crowded global marketplace. His concern was that it would get significantly harder to compete if you were routinely showing up on everyone’s radar screens as nothing more than a nameless, faceless blip.

The solution, as Peters saw it, was to have employees and business professionals begin seeing themselves as self-reliant stewards of their own careers with end-to-end responsibility for their own success. They would literally need to start managing their careers as a business if they had any serious hope of competing in the new millennium.

As a prime example: To execute the CMO (Chief Marketing Officer) function effectively, he believed people actually needed to start thinking of themselves as brands – each with his or her own clearly defined *promise of value* and carrying as much brand distinction as Apple is to Microsoft, Lexus is to BMW, or Birds Eye is to Green Giant. We all needed to become beacons of unique value – along with the authoritative clout to beam those identities out into the farthest reaches of cyberspace.

### **The Resume Becomes Insufficient**

If Tom Peters was correct in his hypothesis that employees were getting swallowed up in a sea of anonymity, it meant that job seekers would need something with far more pizzazz than the garden variety resume to broadcast their value. Let’s not forget that the emerging global marketplace of the mid-1990s still had a voracious appetite for the best available talent but you still had to be visible in order to get found.

In fact resumes were becoming woefully inadequate for both the job-seeker **and** the hiring manager. Hiring managers began to see them as little more than endless cascades of bullet lists documenting this or that achievement at Company “X” but conveying no readily discernible information about the individual’s personality, credibility or hallmark value. For example, an HR manager might be reviewing some impressive credentials for a nuclear fuel rod technician with an IQ of 185 – but with the personality, authenticity and camaraderie of a woodchuck – and no one would be the wiser.

### **The Value Proposition Adds Marketing Magic**

As the “CEO of Me, Inc.” mind-set took root, its early adopters began ripping a page out of the sales and marketing playbook and adapting it to fit a “person as the product” model instead. Enter the **value proposition**: a document that explains how a business solves customers’ problems, delivers specific benefits, and offers a compelling reason to do business with you instead of your competition. If ever there was a template for establishing something close to a personal brand, here it was.

While the value proposition was clearly not a replacement for the resume, it gave job seekers a way to embed some very savvy self-marketing language into an otherwise monotonous historical record of achievement. If written well, these new higher octane resumes not only communicated the experience of a candidate, but offered the screener a fairly reliable measure of an individual’s personality, points of distinction and potential benefits.

### **The Elevator Pitch Packages You as a Sound Bite**

There was another direct benefit of stepping oneself through the creation of a value proposition. It didn’t take long to figure out that “collapsing” the value proposition into a brief, conversational analog provided a convenient 30-second sound bite for casual networking – what we commonly call an “elevator pitch.” The challenge here was that individuals had to know their elevator pitches **COLD**, deliver them flawlessly, and be comfortable enough to spin them in any number of directions *on demand*. Finally, here was a convenient way to articulate your *brand message* and give people a good reason to record you in their mental rolodex.

## Personal Brands Don't Sleep

Personal brands are in constant flux. When you're asleep, your brand is growing, eroding or hanging tough. When you're in surgery under deep anesthesia, when you're washing your daughter's car, when you're cursing your favorite football team for fumbling the ball near the goal line, when you're in quiet prayer at church, or when you're shopping for ceiling tiles at Home Depot – same thing. All that really matters is how people feel about you based on the digital presence you've created and the content you've shared. Don't think for a minute that the Perception Mill comes to a stop just because it's not front and center in your mind at the moment. Personal brands never sleep. Neither does The Perception Mill.

## So Where Do You Stand on the Personal Brand?

It may be time to fine-tune your own position on personal brands and sort out what the concept really means to you. If you accept the premise that the term “personal brand” is just a convenient shorthand for “an individual's aggregate reputation over time,” it's hard to fathom why anyone would summarily reject the concept just because of a distaste for semantics, a misunderstanding of its meaning and value, or its emergence as a way for people to be seen, discovered, known, liked, trusted, hired, engaged and employed.

Embracing a personal brand has nothing to do with putting on a false front. In fact a personal brand can only be a reflection of what you do and the public's overall perception of how well you do it. That can be a very comforting thought – if you hold your brand in high regard – but it can also be a very sobering thought if you don't.

## Resources

- [The Brand Called You](#) (by Tom Peters)
- [The Basics of Personal Branding](#) (by Chip Hartman)
- [Build Your Brand](#) (by Chip Hartman)
- [Article and Template for Value Propositions](#) (by Jean-Claude Balland, Ph.D.)
- [How To Create Powerful Value Propositions](#) (by Jill Konrath)
- [Irresistible Value Propositions](#) (by Jill Konrath)
- [R. I. P. Personal Branding](#) (by Olivier Blanchard)



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