

Do You C.A.R.E. About Your Personal Brand?

Take immediate steps toward showcasing your best self.

BY AMY BLADEN SHATTO

The concept of strategic impression management has been around for decades, but the term *personal brand* is often attributed to management guru Tom Peters in his 1997 *Fast Company* article “The Brand Called You.” It’s that neatly packaged set of perceptions about who you are, what sets you apart from other smart professionals, and what people will recall after meeting you. As concisely captured by marketing expert Ann Friedman, it’s “what you want to be famous for.”

The tricky part is that—while these perceptions ultimately get us remembered, referred, and recommended—they exist only in others’ minds. So, if you are not actively managing your personal brand, others are doing it for you.

They are forming opinions and making decisions that influence—if not fully determine—your work-related success. Therefore, regardless of your technical strengths, it is critical to take an intentional role in marketing the personal brand you want others to recognize.

I often combine branding tips from several sources and recommend, in turn, that you C.A.R.E.—be credible, authentic, reliable, and effective—for a more holistic view of your unique brand promise. The three pillars of your complete brand story are instant or intuitive impression formation, longer-term quality-based criteria in the Peters tradition, and what it truly means to be unique and why it is critical.

Leave a good first impression

To C.A.R.E. for your brand begins immediately. Research shows that others form subconscious, yet surprisingly significant judgments within seconds. In fact, Princeton psychologists Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov found that one-tenth of a second is enough for others to begin forming impressions of a stranger’s trustworthiness and competence.

If people form instant, lasting impressions, you may wonder whether there is even an opportunity for intentional branding. There is. Research confirms that dress, grooming, stance, handshake, and eye contact are all highly correlated to these critical first

4

Questions to Help You Master Your Personal Brand


1

What is your innate superpower? How would others ideally describe this superpower’s attributes?


evaluations. Psychologist Marcia Sirota notes that appropriate dress, hair, and makeup are enough to nudge people to judge us instantly as more influential. Likewise, flashing a smile within the first seven seconds of an interaction makes us appear more trustworthy, approachable, and relatable. Here are a few interesting science-backed tips for instant brand management:

- Make frequent eye contact, without intensely staring, to subconsciously convey intelligence.
- Point your toes toward the person with whom you are speaking to signal interest and respect.
- Assume what *Science of People* magazine calls “the launch position,” with your arms hung loosely to your side, open (unblocked) torso, shoulders down, and head up. This stance suggests command of your space and confidence in your content.
- Mirror others by adjusting your voice, gestures, posture, and words to theirs. Research shows that people innately prefer people who seem similar to themselves.
- Master the firm handshake, avoiding the “dead fish” or “death hold” varieties. Psychologically, this is a recognized signpost that you are a happy, confident, and overall competent colleague.

One of the most interesting tidbits I’ve heard was offered by communications expert Leil Lowndes in her 2009 book *How to Instantly Connect with Anyone: 96 All-New Little Tricks for Big Success in*



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Relationships. Based on a client claim, Lowndes recommends improving the firm handshake by subtly touching the long vein in the other person’s wrist. She suggests that this directly engages a subconscious, positive emotional connection to the heart. While the “vein claim” is debatable, there is no question that there are actions we can take to begin instantly managing our brands.



The C.A.R.E criteria over time

It’s not enough to earn instant brand appeal if you can’t retain that promise over time. In the Peters tradition, experts suggest fostering several behaviors that build longer-term, job-relevant acclaim. These often center on what marketing expert William Arruda labels “the three Cs” (clarity, consistency, and constancy) and provide a road map for being hired—and rehired. While the forums for leveraging this advice have changed since branding has gone social, the nature of the recommendations hasn’t.

Craft Your Elevator Speech

It takes preparation to demonstrate that your personal brand is credible, authentic, reliable, and effective. Use the four Ps to develop your elevator speech:

Plan. Create a list of phrases that describe the real you. Cross off clichés or catchphrases. Keep only the unique and honest statements. It may be helpful to have close friends and family provide a list of adjectives that describe you as you reflect on this step.

Position. Consider the needs of the people you are likely to address in your speech. Focus on relevant problems facing them or their industry that you, specifically, can assist with. Remember, this is not a laundry list of resume skills that many others can replicate. This challenge is about what you can do differently from everyone else out there.

Prepare. Formulate your (no more than 30-second) speech. It should end with a call to action, or what you want the listener to do after you part ways. Be specific.

Practice. No matter how good it is on paper, until you have said it out loud enough times for it to roll off your tongue, you are not ready for prime time. Ask a supportive colleague to work with you on this critical piece.

2

For what do you want to be known as the go-to person? What distinguishes you from other qualified people? (Hint: It’s in your DNA, not your resume.)

3

What is your passion? Being connected to the source of your energy will help you define why others should want to work with you. Passion is contagious.

4

What keeps you going when things are challenging? Where do you derive your strength, resolve, and tenaciousness to deliver your value?

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Richard Branson once said, “A brand is more than a name or a logo—it is a promise and a contract with every [client] with whom you are dealing. And if people feel that the offering does not live up to what they expect from the brand, they will decide to stop buying.” In short, whether by word of mouth, news ad, or social website, one of the fundamental keys to branding yourself is the quality of the offering itself—in this case, you.

A good rule of thumb for marketing a personal brand over time is what I call the “C.A.R.E. criteria”—or actively demonstrating how you are perceived in others’ minds:

- **Credible.** Offer something of value, including wisdom, skills, or other information that positions you as worthy of being sought after for advice. Leverage your expertise, experience, and conviction.
- **Authentic.** Create your value in a way that seems candid, honest, and without an ulterior motive. Maximize authenticity by keeping congruency between words and actions, full disclosure, and candor—or “being real.”
- **Reliable.** Demonstrate 100 percent dependability. Behaviorally, this means consistency in doing what you say every time.
- **Effective.** Deliver flawlessly on your commitments and do so in an appropriate manner for the environment. This accountability for action is the hallmark of your personal brand but—while necessary—is not sufficient without the other criteria.

The C.A.R.E. criteria help to summarize Peters’ ideas for career development and professional positioning. Taken together, they represent the notion that over time, “Good work begets more work.”

Put the you in unique

While authenticity gets at the need to be real, it doesn’t convey the necessary requirement for your brand to be unique, and people nearly always miss this aspect. For example, when asked to describe their unique brand promises in elevator speeches,

participants in my brand and presence sessions typically regurgitate laundry lists of resume-based accomplishments. Further, typical advice on the topic is to hone and present glossy, managed versions of our go-to skills, such as the concise “anchor career statement” recommended by brand expert Karen Leland, author of *Brand Mapping Strategy: Design, Build and Accelerate Your Brand*.

But differentiating brand promise requires identifying true uniqueness that cannot be found in an anchor statement alone. Let’s face it, skills and talent—no matter how good—are replaceable tomorrow, but you, the person, are not.

Ironically, there is not much that distinguishes the real essence of you. Science reveals that 99 percent of a person’s DNA is common among all people, ethnicities, and even gender. But we all instinctively understand that the less than 1 percent that is just yours makes all the difference in the world.

Stated simply, you cannot leave yourself at the door when you go to work. People hire and choose to work with the full person, not the resume. When I hear folks try to present an artificial divide between their work and home selves, I encourage them to rethink that distinction and recognize the great advantage they are choosing not to leverage. To paraphrase *Good Will Hunting*, I can’t play like Mozart, I couldn’t hit a ball out of Fenway, but when it comes to being who I am, I can just do it.

Personal brand management is being aware, conscious, and intentional about that one small piece that makes you unique. No one walks like you, talks like you, or has your passions and commitments quite like you do.

If you are not both connected into the contextual framework and continually bringing that into every moment, you have missed the main message in brand awareness. It’s your brand, which also makes it yours to lose.

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