

Analog vs. Digital Personal Branding—A New Twist on Personal Marketing Plans

By Alan K. Vitberg

In the world of professional-services marketing, the appetite for spending on corporate branding is at a low. Partners are looking for elusive ROI metrics on paid media and public-relations expenditures and appear to be losing faith in the long-term revenue-generating capabilities of branding initiatives. Firms are shifting focus to business-development tactics like lead-driven demand generation programs instead. They also are hiring business-development personnel that can accelerate the sales cycle and make the cash register ring.

Whether it's brand-building or the quicker feet-on-the-street approach to business development, there is one universal constant when it comes to professional-services sales: relationships remain at the center of the sales dynamic. The combination of firm reputation and responsiveness, understanding a prospect's business and situation and the right engagement team with the right qualifications are critical elements in the purchase decision.

But what really drives the sale is the prospect's perception of the lead practitioner's experience, expertise, thought leadership, honesty, integrity and capabilities. The underlying truth is that the listed qualities represent a promise to the prospect that their issues will be resolved. In effect, they symbolize a "personal brand," and that brand is at the core of new business

success in professional services. Firms need to recognize this paradigm and invest in helping their practitioners create and sustain a personal brand.

Before the advent of digital media, successful personal branders operated in an analog world that used tactics such as speaking engagements, meet-and-greets, white papers, *etc.* But the game has changed, and those vehicles, on their own, are no longer enough. Today, digital personal branding, which includes such methods as podcasts, blogs and online social media, must be a part of the personal brand-development mix. In the final analysis, when the last sale is rung, the most effective and successful practitioners will be those who find the right balance between analog and digital personal branding. The opportunity to create and establish a personal brand has never been easier.

What is a personal brand and why do you need one?

"If a corporate brand is an idea in the minds of customers, then a personal brand is the idea of me in the minds of everyone I meet."

—Jennifer Rice,
Blogger.

"...if people buy from people and

if a brand is really the sum total of a customer's interaction with a company, then it follows that in professional services, the personal brand is really all that matters."

—Ben Bradley,
Blogger

The term "personal brand" is believed to have first appeared in the August 1997 issue of *FAST COMPANY MAGAZINE* in an article by management guru and author Tom Peters. Peters wrote, "We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You."

Dan Schwabel, one of the nation's experts on personal branding, describes it as "the process by which individuals and entrepreneurs differentiate themselves and stand out from a crowd by identifying and articulating their unique value proposition, whether professional or personal, and then leveraging it across platforms with a consistent message and image to achieve a specific goal." (www.personalbrandingwiki.pbworks.com/FrontPage)

In other words, a personal brand is a *perception* in the minds of others—a perception you can help create and control—that there is no one in the marketplace quite like you.

Creating a personal brand is the best way you can stand out and prosper in an increasingly noisy and fast-paced business-development world.

Social marketing and media (SMM) has fundamentally changed the traditional marketing/business-development model. With the traditional model, the mantra “it’s not what you know, but who you know” ruled the roost when it came to building a book of business. The SMM landscape changed that mantra to a model that believes “it’s not who you know, but who knows you.” The shift continues to evolve, at breakneck speed, *via* the online tools and platforms people use to share information with each other, such as blogs, social networking sites, wikis, podcasts and shared media.

Digital personal branding is taking shape through older e-marketing tools like Web sites and e-mail, and newer platforms like LinkedIn, Plaxo, Twitter and Facebook. Today, one’s brand is built on a combination of who you know, what you know, how you share that knowledge and insight, and how quickly you bring your thoughts to the table. Firms used to be able to control marketing and personal brand-building by pushing information out to clients, prospects and friends. But today, “push” is giving way to “dialogue,” where people-to-people driven information is becoming an important way to invite prospects into relationships that can be transformed into new business.

There are a number of common denominators between

Analog vs. Digital Personal Branding Tactics

ANALOG PERSONAL BRANDING TACTICS	DIGITAL PERSONAL BRANDING TACTICS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build personal relationships – social and professional • Speaking engagements • Articles, white papers • Newsletters • Business letters • Collateral (brochures) • Public relations • Community involvement • Boards • Awards • Sales skills development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Podcasts • Videocasts • Web sites • Blogs • wikis • Social media – Facebook, linked In, Plaxco, PING, Twitter, You Tube • E-newsletters • E- mail • Various ways and means to link and connect all of the above in an integrated fashion

the two worlds. For example, one might say that tools like LinkedIn and Facebook are nothing more than digital editions of traditional meet-and-greet functions or networking events. The strongest similarity is that thought leadership represents the essence of one’s personal brand, whether it’s executed through a speech given at a trade association or *via* a blog. The relationship between thought leadership, successful personal branding and business development has always been with us—just look around the industry and within your firm to confirm this fact—and probably always will be.

SMM and the democratization of business development

A major effect of SMM on personal branding is that it has democratized the process, shortened the time to build brand equity and cut brand-building costs. In the analog world, only thought leaders got a rostrum to deliver their lofty thoughts, but today, everyone is able to voice their opinion *via* an SMM platform. For example, thought leadership on a new law or regulation now hits cyberspace within minutes, and those thought

leaders with social media literacy are the ones who are putting their imprimatur upon the industry’s news, events and changes of the day, initiating dialogues, and capitalizing upon opportunities for building relationships or mining for new business.

Consequently, small professional-services practices can now get a (digital) seat at the table—right next to a traditional thought leader in a large practice. With a modest amount of e-marketing wizardry, any practitioner can leave his or her analog counterpart in a wake of cyber dust. This fact should give firms who are avoiding SMM great pause; they are at risk of erosion of the thought-leadership positions they have built and maintained over time.

Digital personal-branding tactics don’t replace analog branding: It’s about balance

SMM is not, and should not be, a replacement for analog personal branding. At the end of the day, people buy from people, and this face-to-face relationship-building that is the foundation of the professional-services sales process will never be replaced.

Is Social Media Making Inroads in the Business to Business Market?

Source: July 2009 survey, by BtoB Online and the Association of National Advertisers...

- Among b-to-b marketers, 57% are now using social media channels, up from just 15% in an earlier 2007 survey.
- 34% said the primary objective of their company's Web site was "brand building, down from 49% in 2007.
- 47% said they use the web site for demand generation, up from 37% two years ago.
- Blogs top the list for the "newer media" tactic B to B marketers plan to use within the next year, along with interest in video and podcasts.
- An overwhelming 81% of b-to-b marketers cited LinkedIn as the social media network they currently use.
- Microblogging service Twitter ranked higher among b-to-b (70%) than b-to-c (46%) respondents.
- Facebook is the most-used social media site overall (74%), and enjoys high use among b-to-b marketers (60%).
- 48% of b-to-b marketers found webinars to be effective.
- 62% of b-to-b marketers said they planned increases for spending on newer media.

With SMM, it's about content, frequency and consistency of interaction. You can't count on the goodwill you build by speaking or writing once a year to enhance your brand. You need to commit to using tools like blogs and podcasts on a regular basis.

Some SMM platforms present a forum for extended commentary, opinions and topical insights, but Twitter only allows tweets (*i.e.*, posts) of 140 characters. In the new world of business development, that's enough to post a thought and get a following that will lead to potential new business opportunities.

A downside of SMM is that it accelerates irrelevancy. Effective SMM requires dedication and commitment *via* constant and consistent maintenance of one's personal brand through regular postings, comments and updates to whatever social media platform the practitioner

employs. Frequency of messaging equates directly to relevancy, and relevancy is the basis for creating the perception of thought leadership.

Posts to group forums, tweets and other similar SMM provide a first-to-thought opportunity that digitally literate practitioners deploy in their arsenal of personal branding tactics. Interestingly, it the quality of thought in the professional forums I subscribe to does not appear to suffer at the hands of expediency.

Between servicing clients and analog marketing and business-development activities, it's a fair bet that practitioners consider themselves to be maxed-out when it comes to demands on their time. It's an even safer assumption to say that very few, if any, will trade an afternoon of golfing with clients or prospects to sit and update their blog!

Reality check

Now for a reality check. Traditional sales personalities are likely to be more comfortable operating in an analog world driven by interpersonal relationships and face-to-face networking opportunities. SMM represents an intrusion on their business-development process. Less socially skilled practitioners might find the digital world is far more comfortable than a chamber of commerce dinner.

Finding the right balance between analog and digital tactics is not easy, and the different generations in the workplace don't approach the task in the same way. Younger professionals need to recognize the value of face-to-face relationships and business-development activities; older professionals need to incorporate digital personal branding into their business-development habits.

The movement toward a digital personal brand should trigger a shift or reallocation of personal marketing time and resources, not an addition. Consequently, it may be time to create or revisit and adjust your personal marketing plan, as this will be the forum for determining the right mix and balance between your analog and digital personal branding efforts and activities.

A new framework for personal marketing plans

David Maister once wrote, "What you do with your billable time determines your current income; what you do with your nonbillable time determines your future."

Allocating and balancing your nonbillable time between con-

tinuing professional education, personal brand development and practice-growth/business-development activities is at the heart of the personal marketing plan. While there are many different formats for developing a personal marketing plan, it's time to take a look at a new framework that recognizes the need to achieve balance between analog and digital personal branding. At a minimum, this new framework should have these key components:

1. *Personal Branding Statement:*

A concise way of letting co-workers, prospects, referral sources and friends know what you do and how and why you're different. Like a corporate positioning statement, it has to be short, accurate and immediately understandable.

2. *Personal Brand Strategy:*

As head marketer for the brand called "You," you need to build a brand strategy similar to your corporate strategy. Conduct a situation and SWOT analysis; identify niche opportunities and your target market; define your unique selling proposition, differentiations and your brand positioning; and start the process of determining how you are going to promote the brand.

In the digital world, a few additional steps need to be taken (e.g., reserving a domain name and a name on leading social networks); incorporating plans for activities associated with initiating a conversation, responding to comments and engaging in one-on-one con-

versations). Last but not least, your brand plan should identify the online communities you should join or the online communities that you might wish to build and own.

3. *Personal and Business-Development Goals:*

Personal marketing plans need to have measurable goals related to business development, such as database entries, leads, proposals and sales. Goals for the analog portion of the plan might include numbers of memberships in associations, articles written, speeches given, etc. SMM has whole new categories of success metrics, including friends, followers, contacts, connections, comments and SEO rankings.

4. *Personal Branding Tactics:*

Scratch an older partner, and you'll find a wealth of knowledge and insight as to the best analog tactics for personal brand building and business development. Community and trade association involvement, feature articles in traditional print media, making presentations at trade associations, building a referral network and mentoring are all time-worn, yet essential, personal-branding techniques that should be a part of any personal marketing plan.

SMM, however, has created the need for additional tactics. Because so many tangible and intangible factors are involved in gaining acceptance of SMM in most firms, I recommend a two-phase process:

Phase 1: Secure a Digital Footprint

Develop profiles on social networks such as LinkedIn,

Facebook and Twitter and directories such as Naymz, Plaxo and ZoomInfo.

- Improve your position in Google results by tagging your site in social bookmarks like Delicious.
- Make sure your profile on your firm's Web site is current, accurate and strategically linked within and outside of the site.
- Contribute thought-leadership pieces to your firm's e-media platforms (e.g., newsletters, podcasts, vodcasts (i.e., video podcasts)) that are strategically linked and have a call to action.

Phase 2: Start Dialoguing

- Showcase your personal brand by dialoguing on blogs in your area of expertise with useful responses that deliver insight or an interesting and related fact.
- Tap into your experience and expertise, and reach out to others in your niche by responding to questions on Q&A communities such as LinkedIn. Contribute to your niche with your own expertise by maintaining a blog

5. *Lead Harvesting:*

Include a component for identifying and harvesting the leads that result from digital personal branding.

Conclusion

The concept of brand equity applies to individuals, not just companies and products, and it is indisputable that the value of a practitioner's personal brand for the firm is directly

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ing. Often, I see young partners upset about the level of compensation being paid to older (and primarily unproductive) partners. They talk about the “three times payment,” whereby they say they had to come up with significant capital for an expensive buy-in, then they watched older partners cruising and earning a lot of compensation, and finally they paid these partners an inflated retirement. We have to accept that things like goodwill and deferred compensation can’t be permanent fixtures in any CPA firm. Firms have to be reflective of the times and, more importantly, the continued success of the firm. I’ve had partners tell me that they don’t want to change their deferred-compensation program; they had to overpay the generation before them, and they’ll be damned if they’re not going to see those same benefits. If they don’t change their attitude, I tell them, they run the risk of getting no benefits!

In terms of the older partners, we’re seeing older partners wanting to work past age 65. I’m finding that we are not so much rethinking mandatory retirement as finding ways for talented partners to take on roles within the firm beyond age 65, providing they de-equitize and don’t sit in a leadership or decision-making role. I am seeing many, many talented partners between the ages of 65–80 who have a lot to offer, provided they are willing to transition their books and relationships to their younger partners.

Q: You had two outstanding quotes to open and close your presentation. Would you share those with our readers?

A: I opened by saying that, after a grueling nationwide survey, I had found the perfect compensation system: sole practitioner. In that world, if you’re not happy with your compensation, go look in the mirror.

The other quote came from Daryl Ritchie, CEO of Meyers Norris Penny. While addressing

his partners at an annual retreat, talking about some of the critical investments and strategies that the firm was planning to implement, Ritchie said, “Average partner compensation will increase [due to these initiatives] but, for the average partner, it will probably stay the same.” The essence of his comment was that if you want to cruise and not help the firm achieve its strategic initiatives, don’t expect the big dollars to come your way when the pie is allocated at year end.

Editor’s note: If you have any questions about this article or any other issues facing your firm, please feel free to contact Allan D. Koltin, CPA, CEO of PDI Global, Inc. and a founding member of The Advisory Board at AKoltin@pdiglobal.com or 312-245-1930 and Marsha.Leest@WoltersKluwer.com. We welcome your input and ideas and we hope you will continue to look to CPA PRACTICE MANAGEMENT FORUM for guidance and best practices. ✦

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proportionate to that brand’s ability to create and wield influence and make the cash register ring. This is true for older practitioners, who are starting to transition out of the firm and want to guarantee the firm’s viability as well as their legacy, and for younger practitioners, who

are seeking to make names for themselves and ensure the firm’s sustainability long into the future.

There has never been a more opportune time, and there has never been the depth and breadth of personal branding tools available to do so. Take advantage of it.

About the author: Alan Vitberg is Director of Market-

ing for The Bonadio Group, an independent member of Moore Stephens International Limited and a Top 100 CPA firm headquartered in Rochester, NY. He is a writer, speaker, professional services marketing thought leader and frequent contributor to CPA PRACTICE MANAGEMENT FORUM. He can be reached at 585.249.2773, via LinkedIn or by e-mail: avitberg@bonadio.com. ✦

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