



# Create a Brand-New *Online* You

**Maintaining a positive reputation on the Internet is vital in today's job market.**

By Dan Schawbel

Like corporate brands and logos, entrepreneurs are presenting themselves as brands that communicate different values, personalities, and images to their audiences.

This concept—personal branding—has transformed the way professionals can present themselves to potential recruiters or clients.

As competition in the marketplace intensifies, many professionals are turning to personal branding to distinguish themselves from the competition. According to a recent survey by Korn/Ferry, an executive search firm, personal branding registered more than

11 percent among factors that draw an executive recruiter's attention.

## Developing a brand

When creating a personal brand, you must differentiate yourself from other people vying for the same position or project. The Internet is the primary communication tool that decision makers use to search for information on people. To reach recruiters or clients, you must construct an effective online version of your personal brand. This online brand should consist of four elements:

**Appearance:** A combination of your body language, dress, and overall appeal

to your audience should be established by incorporating video clips and photographs on your personal website.

**Personality:** The impression your audience gathers from the content that you post on your blog, website, podcasts, and other online media will give them a glimpse of your personality.

**Competencies:** Your skills and abilities that fulfill the job requirements and allow you to perform successfully should be presented on your website.

**Differentiation:** You should include one or more unique characteristics that separate you from other applicants.

When these four elements are woven together, they create your core message to your audience. A core message, sometimes referred to as an elevator pitch, is a condensed message with which you can convince a recruiter or client that you are the right person for the position or project.

There are multiple methods and communication channels that you can use to shine light on your personal brand.

**YourName.com.** Start the branding process by purchasing your name as a domain. This allows you to rank high on search engines and makes it easier for people to find you online. Your domain should be a collection of all your work and branding materials. After purchasing your domain and adding pages, such as your résumé and portfolio, you need to spread the word about your site to your audience by word-of-mouth marketing. Another tactic is viral marketing whereby you contact others by email and phone and by submitting your domain to search engines like Google. If you already have a blog or another website, be sure to link your brand domain to it.

**Avatars.** These small graphical elements should form a professional picture of you. Avatars are used in a variety of ways on the Internet, but are especially concentrated in social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, and many blog networks. Corporations use avatars to illustrate their logos as a form of advertising. Avatars have recently been deemed the standard for portrait displays in Web 2.0. By using a professional photo of yourself, construct an avatar before investing in other parts of your brand. After developing one, you can use it as leverage on almost all social networking websites.

**Social networks.** Today, most of the population in the United States is registered with at least one social networking website such as MySpace. If you join one of these networks, be sure to set your privacy controls, use professional pictures, and moderate comments and messages. Recruiters and clients visit these websites and may view you in a negative light if they find questionable messages or content relating to your professional or personal life.

**Blogs.** Blogs not only create communities of people that share similar interests, but also act as subscription services, through which your words are syndicated to emails or other websites using RSS feeds. Blogging is one of the most remarkable personal branding channels because the content is typically very personal and direct.

Blogs consist of posts that are either written or posted in video format. When starting a blog, you may register with a host such as Google Blogger or WordPress. The goal of a blog is to stand out, so choose a niche topic in which you have expertise and blog about it on an ongoing basis. Avoid any ideas or visuals that might give your personal brand a bad reputation. Use photos and videos to emphasize your points, and link to other blogs that directly connect to your topic. Be sure to comment on other blogs to create a network.

**Podcasts.** Podcasting is a useful communication channel because it highlights your overall brand with dynamic content. Video content is especially beneficial to your brand if you have a vivacious personality in front of the camera. In the future, résumés will likely be formatted into multimedia, and individuals will have to pitch their core message in a 30-second video that they will then forward to a recruiter.

**Forums.** Discussion forums give you the ability to learn from others, display your brand through an avatar, and promote your personal profile. By participating in forums, especially ones involving recruitment, you are able to connect with others who share your interests or recruiters and clients who have open positions in their organizations or projects.

**LinkedIn.** A networking website, LinkedIn allows you to connect with previous co-workers, schoolmates, or new acquaintances. Because your network is your most powerful tool in your career, be sure to connect with new acquaintances through this site. Display your résumé and include recommendations and a core summary of your personal brand.

### **Maintaining a positive reputation**

Almost 7 percent of all searches conducted on Google are targeted to an individual's name, according to Ask.com. More than 80 percent of executive recruiters use Google to look up candidates prior to meeting them, according to a study by executive online network ExecuNet. Harris Interactive, a market research company, reports that nearly 40 percent of individuals use Google to look up friends or acquaintances. What does

all this mean? It means that your online personal brand needs to be strong and positive, and it needs to rank high on Google and other search engines.

Search engine optimization, commonly referred to as SEO, takes into account the arithmetic relevancy model that Google uses for all websites. In order to rank high in the search results, you must follow this model, which means that your website must contain the most relevant content and keywords on the subject matter. The best way to achieve this is a tactic known as "link bait." This requires getting other websites to link to your website so that it is perceived as the best resource for the given keyword or topic.

Occasionally, your name might be displayed in a negative fashion. With millions of blogs freely writing about various subjects, there is a chance that someone might disagree with your brand or your opinions and "blog against you." If this happens, be sure to connect with that individual and settle the issue without personally attacking him. It is very important to be strategic when you respond to any personal attacks or posts.

To successfully guard your brand reputation online, you need to constantly patrol the Internet by searching for your name, reading commentary, and then acting appropriately. At the same time, you want to develop content that counters negative commentary. If you are unable to dedicate time to reputation management, find companies with public relations expertise that specialize in online reputation management and personal branding.

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**Dan Schawbel** advises and mentors students and young professionals on branding issues. He has written articles for the *New York Times* and the *Association of Career Development*, and has been a guest author on several blogs; [www.personalbrandingblog.com](http://www.personalbrandingblog.com).

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