

Create Your Own Unique Online Brand

By

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Discover and Communicate Your Passion

Branding has evolved from nonsensical trademark names to descriptive words that tell people who you are and what your passion is in life. Take, for instance, Xerox: this name had no real meaning until the machines came out and people used them as a common meaning for photocopying papers. While the brand is now known worldwide, the brand has been completely diluted into a generic meaning that is hard to defend as being unique and expressive of a company brand. In order to create a brand name today, you want to give special attention to the qualities that make this name unique and how it is descriptive of what you do or who you are in business or life.

PERSONAL BRANDING

In a way, we all come into this world with our own personal branding: Our names. This tells members of our family and the people we meet who we are, but doesn't really express our personal qualities. Sometimes, people acquire nicknames or make up their own to help express more of their own unique qualities, and this is used as a form of group personal branding. If that personal branding also expresses what your passion in life is, you can use it to help

promote yourself to others. Personal branding, as well as business branding, is all about conveying your self-image to others in a way that what they perceive is identical to what you are projecting to them.

BUSINESS BRANDING

If you have a domain name, that's a form of business branding, just like your business name is. These tend to be more expressing of the products and services offered rather than of the personal qualities of the owner. In the past, in conventional advertising, you would know the business name before you learned the owner's name. However, with so many people using social networks these days, personal branding is becoming as equally important in business and company branding.

PROJECTING PASSION

Whether you choose one, the other, or both to promote, the idea is to project your passion to a bigger audience. If your passion is connecting others to their soul mates, then you might use a business or personal name with the word love in it. That's your passion. It's not as hard as it seems to think up a few choice brand names to try out. What is hard is

reserving them online when so many have already been snapped up by others.

Brainstorm and Research Your Brand

That's why in order to get a good one, you have to start to brainstorm early. It's going to take a while to come up with a brand name that you love and that is also available as a domain name. One thing is certain: most two-word-phrased domain names are already taken. You will probably have to go with three words or more, or you might try purchasing a smaller domain name from someone who is squatting on it and waiting for a buyer to offer him/her some money.

DO RESERVE YOUR PERSONAL NAME

Even if you're not going to use it for business, you will want to reserve as many profiles and even a domain name with your name in it. Celebrities with established careers already have lawyers who do this on a regular basis for them.

However, if you start your business brand and then you suddenly achieve fame in the middle of it all, you'll probably end up paying someone else to give back your personal brand name on the Internet. There are many opportunists out there who go out and try to reserve names like Paris Hilton or other notables with large followings. If your following increases, so will the number of fake spammers

out there, and you want to be ready by having already reserved your name on the biggest sites like Facebook, Twitter, and a personal branded .com name.

RESEARCH AVAILABILITY

Hop online now and check to see what's available for your domain name possibilities using Whois.net. You can check a variety of different extensions besides .com sites. If the domain is already reserved or bought, you will see the owner of the domain name. It will also tell you who you can contact should you want to try and buy the name.

Otherwise, you can get onto popular hosting sites of your choice and try to register the domain name. Whois.net will also tell you (when it's not available) what other names you might try to reserve instead that are available. Typically, they are prefixed with the word my or something similar, but are slightly different. You can even register the domain name right there for a charge of \$9.95/year.

Promote Your Brand

Online, if you want to be known as an expert, all you have to do is to claim to be an expert and then help others with your expertise. People learn who you are by interacting with you and can make up their own opinions about you and your company. The interactivity and the ability to reach people all around the world for very little money is what levels the playing field between companies and individuals.

Information isn't as segregated as it once was, and it's also quite a bit more transparent. Now, no matter how much a big company spends on promoting some defective product, odds are that there will be numerous online complaints that are easily accessible and that dissuade new customers from purchasing a defective product. In the same vein, if you have a spectacular brand and some wonderful product or service, you can promote the brand and the positive vibes by sharing that information online to attract new customers.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO ONLINE

There are a few places online that you can leverage to get the most positive publicity with minimal effort. You could spend a lot more time plastering the World Wide Web with your own press release, but ultimately, as a business owner,

you just don't have the time to do too much promotion. Even if you can do the following list, you should seriously think about hiring a company or an individual to help you publicize your offerings online in a manner that will get you more exposure.

- **Online business cards**

Replace your paper cards with a digital version that allow you to share it much more easily online.

- **Digital resumes**

If your personal experience is important to your business, be sure to update archives with your personal digital resume.

- **Portfolios**

You might have a freelance company or be a solopreneur who is interested in showing off some of your work via your online portfolio.

- **Website**

This can be a formal site or a blog, as long as it is a central place to show people who you are and what you're up to with your business.

- **Social networks**

These include Facebook and Twitter and are great for getting traffic back to your site.

- **Email campaigns**

Simple ways to directly market to your audience.

Online Business Cards

In the past, you would do business and help to create brand awareness through a paper business card. While there is still a place for these quaint relics of the past, the more modern versions use an online, interactive component to share your personal brand digitally so that there is less chance that it will get lost or overlooked. Besides, when was the last time you saw anyone pull out a rolodex of business cards to contact anyone? With so many businesses promoting their brands online, which costs far less and is more effective, it pays to step into the information age with enthusiasm.

E-BUSINESS CARDS

A copy of the paper business card in digital format is easy enough to create. Distributing it is far more efficient than trying to hand someone a paper card. You can go to places like www.mydropcard.com or www.Businesscard2.com to use the service to create your own e-business card. These types of cards have the advantage of being able to be transmitted to other people's electronic gadgets, like their cell phone, and will store your email in their directories. With so many phones having messaging capabilities, it puts your online email address right at their fingertips, with little

intervention on your part. In addition, you can add other types of links to these business cards that can be viewed on phones with Internet capabilities. You might want to add your Facebook and/or Twitter profiles or any other site that you use for branding you or your business.

BRAND YOUR DIGITAL MEDIA

Your digital media can include ebooks, CDs, and videos on YouTube. You alone know where all of your digital media ends up residing. It can also be sales promotional tools like DVDs and USB drives. Add your brand information there and make sure it comes up in auto-run mode so that when people use your products or services, they are also seeing your official e-business card that tells them where they can find more of your products or services or learn more about your brand.

People love getting novel gifts for sales promotions and having your brand printed on them and in digital format is not going to bother them. If it is an item that they use frequently, it's like having a mini-commercial installed on their tool that will be a little annoying, but will also be very valuable for when they want to know who to contact for more of the same products and services. Never underestimate the power of a clever business card. It can

lead to referrals and more business with very little upfront work.

Digital Resumes

Paper resumes are good if you're looking for a job, but they aren't very good if you're trying to promote your business online. Putting up a list of your accomplishments and some of your past achievements is a good way to let people know what circles you travel in and what type of quality they can expect from you. Businesses that are in consulting or freelancing can also benefit from digital resumes that list their previous projects. You can write up several, differently formatted resumes that highlight your strengths and promote your past experience. In some cases, you can even add that to your business profiles.

BRANDING ON JOB BOARDS

When you're on a job board, you are competing against hundreds, if not thousands, of other people who are looking for work during this recession. It's a shame, but many human resource people aren't even going to read your resume. They might grab a bunch of electronic resumes and stick them through a resume reader looking for specific keywords. That's why part of branding your resume is to use keywords that will best describe your skills and experience, and that might also be searched by offline companies.

It's important to be as detailed as possible, like including the names of the equipment you work with, software programs and versions, or languages that you speak or program in. Include keywords for the type of experience you have, whether it's technical, management, or retail. It's also important to include several different copies of your resume, one in HTML format and one in text format, so that they can download the right format and chug it through their resume readers.

LINKEDIN

In addition to using bulletin boards like Monster.com, you are sometimes better off using a social network like LinkedIn.com that allows you to post resume information for other professionals to view. It's also a great place to post this type of information because, unlike Monster.com, LinkedIn.com allows you to request recommendations from people. This way, you not only have a viewable resume that is searchable in search engines, but people viewing it can see how many other people have nice things to say about you.

LinkedIn.com is a great place for professionals who are out of work and for those who still have a job to network. It's

great for people who are business owners who want to network with their customers and who want to offer a professional look at who they are and what they do. However, this isn't really enough to make up someone's mind. A portfolio of past projects will give your profile life.

Portfolios

Portfolios provide a visual and audio way to influence someone with your brand, not just with written text. A good portfolio has samples of your best work for new customers to review before making a buying decision. Artists have long used paper portfolios to get into the best schools and to show new customers their work. Digital portfolios can include anything from photography snapshots of offline work, music .jpgs, and video content. It doesn't have to be just about your written work. The more you wow and dazzle your viewer, the more likely they are to buy from you.

EXHIBIT YOUR NICHE

The sample within your portfolio should be used to showcase your brand. What is your niche and what makes these pieces representative of your expertise? If you're a musician with a specific style, you might want to showcase that style to attract more work. If you're a writer with a talent for specific niches or styles of writing, be sure to include pieces that reflect that information in your portfolio. When trying to project your brand online, don't mix it with too many other styles or niches that aren't related to your own brand. This just dilutes the power of your portfolio and leaves people

confused about who you are and what you are offering. Try to stay within your niche of expertise and try to send a strong message that you excel in this area.

SITES WITH PORTFOLIOS

You can include your portfolio on freelance sites, like GetAFreelancer.com and MySpace.com. Some sites do better with different audiences, and it's not unusual to have one portfolio in one area be different from another portfolio to cater to different audiences. For instance, MySpace.com caters to a younger audience, and their style is more bold than professional places like GetAFreelancer.com. However, this is just the audience that buys music and loves to experiment with musical styles and videos. You might put music on here that appeals to this demographic and include different music in a different portfolio elsewhere. Match the portfolio to the site you're posting on.

INCLUDE DIFFERENT FORMATS

Include multiple formats so that if one format isn't easily viewed, another one will be. That goes for Word documents, images, and musical files. You don't know what people have on their PCs, and when a file doesn't play, it can make you look bad, even if it's not your fault. Including some helpful

hints for playing files and opening them can help people be aware that proper software needs to be on their systems in order to view those files.

Blog Or Website

Owning your own website is critical to branding online. Whether the site is a strict HTML site, an e-commerce site, or a blog, it doesn't matter. The one thing you want to make sure of is that you own the rights to the content of the site and that it centralizes all of your activities for that niche on one site. If you have multiple niches online, then you'll have multiple websites. It's important to consider the type of website you want, how often you intend on updating the content, and what sort of domain name best conveys your brand.

DOMAIN NAME REGISTRATION

As mentioned earlier, be sure to pick a good domain name. Don't include odd characters like hyphens, as they can throw people off. A three-word domain name is a good choice, since most two-word domains have already been taken. However, if you can get a smaller domain name, that's all the better, even if you have to pay for it. You want a top-level domain name instead of a site that gives you a sub-domain on their server. This gives your brand a more professional image and helps people to remember you better.

WORDPRESS.ORG

After you've picked a hosting company, you have to decide what type of website to create that will be used to brand your presence on the Web. If you're a professional consultant or freelancer, a blog is a great way to personally introduce yourself to others online. Blogs have gotten so sophisticated over the years that many company sites are also using blogs within their content.

You can easily have your hosting company install a copy of Wordpress.org on your site. This can be customized with multiple templates to give you a professional appearance in a very short time. Just be sure that you aren't using the community called WordPress.com if you want a top-level domain. This site looks the same, but it doesn't allow you to put your own advertising and to really brand your site with a top-level domain.

OTHER TYPES OF SITES

In fact, blogs aren't the only type of site that has gotten much easier to install via prepackaged modules on hosting sites like DreamHost.com. You can get content management sites and even membership sites in some cases. Think about what kind of brand you have and what type of site would

best help your visitors to better experience your brand.
Make it a very professional site to give you personal and
business credibility.

Branding With Social Networks

Social networks are great for personal and business branding. Each social network has its own strengths and weaknesses. They all attract different demographics too. LinkedIn attracts professionals in established careers, MySpace attracts a teen crowd, and Facebook attracts young professionals just coming out of college and getting into the workforce. Business owners can get online and brand themselves for different audiences, depending on who is their core demographic of buyers.

HOW TO BRAND ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

Profiles are the first place that you can brand on social networks. They are personal snapshots of your likes and dislikes. They can include the groups you join on Facebook, books and movies you've enjoyed, what types of relationships you are looking to make on Facebook, and photos of yourself. Remember that photos are a particularly powerful means to brand yourself, and they can help or hurt you. Don't include photos where you are in an embarrassing position or that can change the image someone has of you or your company.

Do include images of your business logo. Do add your blog to the NetworkedBlogs application so that others can see it on your profile. The more friends you have in your niche brand, the more people will associate those qualities with you. If you want to be known as a savvy Internet marketer who can help others with social networking, then you might want to link to people who have that as their main topic of interest or who have joined groups on that niche.

START TO INTERACT WITH OTHERS

Next, it's important to portray the personality and qualities that you want to associate with your brand in personal interactions on the site. One of the newest trends is to make an introductory video thanking people for being your friend on Facebook and telling them more about yourself. You can add this link to their profile as a way of saying hello when they befriend you.

Use status updates wisely to promote your brand and offerings. Don't just use it as an easy way to spam people. In social networking, you have to seek to add value to be a brand with integrity. Heavy-duty commercialism is frowned upon, and you don't want to be known as someone who promotes himself/herself too much. Instead, you can offer value and still generate brand awareness by offering helpful

hints and links to informational content, even if it's not your own. People will associate it with your brand, and it will contribute to the community at the same time.

Differences Between Facebook And Twitter Branding

There are distinct differences with each of these social networking platforms. If you know what those differences are, you can set up a strategy to brand on both while not doing twice the amount of work. They are compatible, but they require different strategies for different audiences.

TWITTER

Let's start with Twitter.com. This unique social networking site is also referred to as a "microblogging" site. The entire concept revolves around a status update that you can update all day long, but it's limited to 140 characters each time you update, which are known as "tweets." Within those 140 characters, you can post links back to other places online using a URL shortener. In general, it is far easier to gain a massive audience with Twitter than it is with Facebook. You send out tweets, and people who follow you will see them. If they "retweet" your message, people on their list will see them, and you can gain more followers. You can add several hundred followers a day on Twitter, and many of those will automatically follow you back, increasing your audience. You can automate tweets to go out all day,

even when you're not online, and you can even send them to Facebook with an application within Facebook.com called Selective Twitter.

FACEBOOK

Facebook tends to be more complex in terms of the amount and the quality of content you can add. While this means that you can brand far more effectively, it's to a smaller audience. You can also set up a sales page on Facebook for a company and advertise it to the entire Facebook audience based on the demographics that you. This allows you to brand outside your immediate circle of friends, although it does cost to utilize this advertising format.

By using Selective Twitter you can send some of your tweets to Facebook, but you need to take care not to update Facebook as much as you update Twitter. People will want to hear less from you if you spam their news feed with your Twitter updates, and that's one of the main differences between branding on Twitter and on Facebook. On Twitter, you can talk on and on and no one cares, but if you try that on Facebook, people will drop you and many won't tell you why. It's a more intimate setting, and no one likes a bore.

Email Campaigns

Once you have a large following around the Internet, it's time to take your branding to a more personal level. You will want to try to harvest as many email addresses as you can in your activities and get permission to market to these people directly. Once you have that, you will want to establish an email marketing campaign that starts to show people on a one-to-one basis what your company or your products are all about.

YOUR EMAIL SIGNATURE

The first place to brand within email is by way of automatic signatures. If you don't have one set up to point people to your website, to your offer of the week, or to a personal biography, you are missing a great opportunity to brand. If someone contacts you for anything, it's the perfect opportunity to sneak in some information on your private brand via the automatic email signature.

YOUR INTRODUCTORY EMAIL

Twitter will allow you to automate direct messages to people who follow you via direct messaging. You're on your own with Facebook. Either way, you can join SocialOomph and

send out direct messages for each person who follows you, giving them an introductory message that shows more about you and your brand to them. Every introductory email should seek to contribute value and to not sell anything. There will be plenty of time to sell something later; first, try to establish a genuine connection with people, but make them aware of your brand.

A PLANNED EMAIL CAMPAIGN

Set up planned email campaigns using a service like AWeber.com. You can offer the same type of casual, informational style that is popular with social networks, but include links to your products and offers. Include branding information like videos and applications that can help people understand more about you and your company. Always mix in free branding offers with sales offers. This way, when they open an email, they don't expect that they'll be sold every time. People just don't like that. It's like answering the door to a pushy salesman. However, if they find that you give away free information about 50% of the time that might benefit them, they'll be more likely to open that email.

Try different branding subject headlines in different emails and run split testing to see what gets a better reaction. AWeber.com will give you statistics on open rates and click-

through rates. Once you start to watch the results of your branding efforts, you have to have direct feedback on what is working and what is not. It will tell you how to tweak your marketing so that your message becomes more appealing every time you send out a new email, increasing brand awareness and sales at the same time.