

OUTSMART YOUR COMPETITION IN 5 EASY STEPS

You have great skills, a pleasant personality, interesting products or services but chances are, so does your competitor. Then what will make a potential client choose you? What will motivate an existing client to do repeat business? Competition is tough, but it gets even tougher in challenging financial times. You try to find creative ways to keep your business thriving despite the slower economy but sometimes nothing seems to work, no matter how ingenious you get. Maybe that's because you are not focussing on the right area.

Have you ever considered personal branding to outsmart your competition? Let's face it; if you do not brand yourself, other people will and that can bring you to a place you'd rather not be. You need to take control over your reputation, your image and your credibility. This can be achieved through personal branding. But what does it mean? It means that under any circumstance, you must be **AUTHENTIC** to who you are and what business you represent, **CONSISTENT** in your message, approach and identity, and **CLEAR** about your goals and ambitions. In other words, when people speak with you, look at you or meet with you, there should be no ambiguity. Personal branding will help differentiate you from your competition. It is a fundamental approach to your business that will allow you to move on to the next level of success. Here are 5 easy steps to help you get a head start.

STEP # 1 – ASK YOURSELF SOME TOUGH QUESTIONS (AND PLEASE, DO ANSWER THEM!)

Since personal branding is a fundamental approach, it requires fundamental reflection. You must dig deep inside to understand your true motivations. Your outside image will always reflect what stirs you inside, and if you think people cannot “see” your core being, think again. You are more transparent than you would like to believe. In order to find your brand, one that people will believe in and trust, it must take root from your core values. Ask yourself, and more importantly, **answer** the following questions:

- What are my true values (personal and professional)?
- What do I love / dislike the most about my job?
- At what am I the best / the most challenged?
- Of what am I the most proud / the most regretful?
- What do I want to achieve – who do I want to become?
- What makes me different?

This is not an easy exercise and what you find out about yourself may surprise you. Give yourself time to reflect and answer truthfully, as these answers will be the core of your personal branding. Once you have your answers, you will be able to identify the following:

- **WHAT YOU'RE EXCELLENT AT AND WHAT REALLY STIMULATES YOU** – focus on that particular notion and build your brand around it. Your passion will shine through and you will become renowned for your expertise. Your personal branding will then be a clear fit to your personality and what your business stands for.

- **WHAT YOU STRUGGLE AT AND WHAT YOU REALLY DON'T LIKE** – is it possible to remove this particular element by delegating, outsourcing, simply letting it go or changing your business focus? If not, can you become better at it by updating your skills, or automating it? The idea is to simplify your life and more importantly, to minimize the number of frustrating tasks that undermine the accomplishment of your goals. You cannot have a genuine personal brand if there is something bothering you about the image you are trying to convey.
- **WHAT MAKES YOU UNIQUE AND WHAT IS YOUR ULTIMATE GOAL** – identifying your unique skills and focussing on them are the roots of your personal brand. Hundreds of people earn a living doing the same job as you. What makes you unique is what makes you memorable. People are busy, stressed and hungry for time. Your impact on them has to be strong, quick and memorable. You do this by adding an element of surprise that temporarily takes them out of their usual mindframe and locks you in their minds.

Knowing your ultimate goal allows you to focus in the right places and move in the right circles. This brings the element of consistency to your image and business that is needed to build the trust with your clients.

**DON'T CLOSE DOORS TO NEW IDEAS.
THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IS TO BE TRUE TO YOURSELF.**

STEP # 2 – BE REMEMBERED (FOR THE RIGHT REASONS!)

Having an impressive resume, several years of experience and outstanding skills in your field may not be enough to outshine your competition. You need to find a way to make people remember **YOU** – create that lasting impression that will make people want to do business with you. One of the CEOs with whom I worked during my corporate years often referred to the workplace as being made up of “Energy Creators” and “Energy Consumers”. The first group assembles people who stimulate, energize and inspire you while the second group are people who dispirit, demoralize and discourage you. With whom would you want to do business?

In order to become an Energy Creator, you must refine your soft-skills so that your brand is not just about your credentials and external image, but also about the perception that you leave behind. Good manners and etiquette are not outdated. Everyone is sensitive to being treated with respect and consideration. Be genuine in your approach. Don't try to emulate someone else's style. Find your own. Be a voice of change if you do not like something. View challenges as opportunities.

**BE A POSITIVE INFLUENCE AND A PROBLEM SOLVER.
PEOPLE WILL DEFINITELY REMEMBER THAT.**

STEP # 3 – PACKAGE YOUR FIRST IMPRESSION

It takes just a few seconds to scan a person and make a judgement about who they are based on their “packaging”. Is there a disconnect between your outside image and your product, service or

company? If you answered yes then you will not be able to create the necessary trust needed to establish the business relationship, let alone the credibility needed to make a lasting impression.

Packaging yourself requires **CONSISTENCY** of image, message and goals. Reflect on the following elements:

- Your business card
- Your logo
- Your office environment
- Your website
- Your mission statement
- Your marketing material (presentations, brochures, handouts)
- Your personal style (including appearance, etiquette and non-verbal language)

Do these elements all link in together? If someone picks up your brochure or business card, will they be able to understand what business you are in? If they meet you in person, will they feel that you are a fit for your product or service? If they visit your website, will they get the right impression about your mission and what you can do for them? Finally, when they have done all of the above, will they have a consistent image of you and your business? **CLARITY** is the key and people can only trust you if there is no ambiguity about who you are and what you stand for.

**YOUR PACKAGING IS MORE THAN A WRAPPER, IT'S YOUR FIRST SELLING PITCH.
MAKE IT MEMORABLE.**

STEP # 4 – GET OUT THERE

Sitting in your office hoping for the phone to ring will probably not land you the Best Business of the Year Award. Business is based on relationships and you need to meet new people on a regular basis. People need to know you and learn about your great work, your achievements, even your hobbies. Networking is a great way to connect to different people, to make key contacts and to build the trust that will be the foundation of lasting business relationships. So how do you get exposure?

- Become a guest speaker
- Volunteer for a fund-raising activity
- Join a networking group
- Join on-line network sites
- Organize workshops
- Write articles for magazines, newspapers, etc.
- Create a dynamic website with regular content update

When you share what you know, you are planting seeds. If you are not at ease with your presentation, public speaking or networking skills, hire a professional to help you out. Once you master a few basic points, it will give you the self-confidence to go out there and tell the world how great you are and why they can't live without you.

LET PEOPLE EXPERIENCE YOU.

STEP # 5 – CONNECT & SURPRISE

Do something new, unexpected, unique and that challenges your clients. People will choose you because you represent something that they cannot find anywhere else, because they can identify with you and clearly understand why you are the one that can help them. Make them feel special. Business is also about connecting on an emotional level with your clients. This means you need to understand their “pain”, express it to them and offer a solution that they had not thought about. That solution needs to fit your brand so that your clients can immediately link a sense of relief, gratitude and positive outcome to you and your business. If you become the one that solves their problem, you become an instant hero. And this, my friends, is your key to repeat business.

CONNECT WITH SURPRISE, DELIGHT AND EMPATHY.

Personal branding is not an option. It's a must. Finding your brand will require work but the benefits will outweigh the time investment. Once you find and promote your personal brand, you will attract the right clients to your business. Although you may need to tweak and refresh your brand once in a while, it will follow you for years. For example, look at the Rolling Stones. From the moment the band formed in 1962 up until now, they have maintained their rebel, bad-boy, in-your-face persona even though they are well into their 60's. Same goes for French actress Catherine Deneuve, a 65 year-old movie and fashion icon for the last 48 years – her brand is, and has always been, a flawless classic beauty, refined and elegant. There is no ambiguity. Both these examples are **AUTHENTIC**, **CONSISTENT** and **CLEAR** in the message that they convey. We know exactly what we are getting.

As John C. Maxwell, internationally recognized leadership expert once said: “Competence goes beyond words. It's the leader's ability to say it, plan it, and do it in such a way that others know that you know how – and know that they want to follow you.”

Such self-confidence and competence are attainable by anyone. Personal branding is one of the ways that will help you get there. So why wait? Carpe Diem.

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