

Director Development

The Power of a Personal Brand

By Rochelle Campbell



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Whether you are seeking your next executive position, a consulting engagement, or a board seat, thoughtfully curating a personal brand will give you an advantage in today's social media-savvy culture. Yet how to understand, augment, and maintain a personal brand is an unfamiliar concept for many people. Intentionally or not, you have built a personal brand throughout your career. The questions are, what kind of brand have you built, how strong is it, and how should you promote it?

Diane Miller, board director and CEO of Wilcox, Miller & Nelson, a corporate governance and recruiting firm, advises executives to consider a personal brand as “your cumulative experiences over time.” That is, your brand is the result of your tangible and intangible talents and characteristics, the output of which guides the feelings, knowledge, and impressions others have about you.

Consider consumer brands that you have come to trust over time. Think about your favorite athletes, authors, business leaders, or actors, many of whom carefully craft their personal brands through social media, interviews, endorsements, and publicity. How they present themselves—be it as “all American,” “humanitarian,” or “hip”—is calculated. Your brand likewise can be powerful in the circles that matter to you, whether you are the vice president of a \$5 million private company or the chief executive of a billion-dollar public company. Your brand is the culmination of your years of business experience and expertise, the soft skills you employ in your everyday relationships, and the additional measures you take to socialize and share your brand.

Miller has worked throughout her career to maintain a strong reputation, often associated with two distinct components: her tactical knowledge of culture integration (hard skills), and her direct and inquisitive board communication style (soft skills). She has also worked to socialize her brand by accepting numerous speaking engagements and nonprofit board roles. As a result, she has

been honored for her work and has served on large public and private company boards.

As you consider your professional development goals, if you are not already a director, you may want to augment your personal brand with board service to a nonprofit organization to gain additional oversight experience and increase your exposure to others.

Curating Your Brand

When Andrea Bonime-Blanc, a governance, risk, and ethics strategist and the author of *A Strategic Cyber-Roadmap for the Board*, began her consulting practice, she considered what was unique about her that allowed her to be competitive in the industry. Specifically, she said she asked herself, “What is it that I am trying to convey and sell? Then I defined it very clearly for myself and it was easy to talk about it.”

Bonime-Blanc explained that because she is truly passionate about what she does, people perceive her as being authentic. She added, “Your brand has to be several things, including competence and contribution.” What it cannot be is fake or pushy. Rather, curating your own brand requires highlighting and marketing the special attributes that combined make you who you are.

Jennifer Wolfe, a branding and intellectual property specialist, recommends separating your brand from your jobs. “When you have spent 20 to 30 years defining yourself by a specific role, job title, or company, shifting the way you view the world and allowing yourself to see yourself in a new way take time,” said Wolfe, who is CEO of Dot Brand 360 and co-author of *Brand Rewired* and *Digital in the Boardroom*.

Bonime-Blanc agrees. She spent a lot of time working on her personal brand, convincing herself and others of the value she could offer boards and clients. “If you strip away your title and company, what is it that you have to offer?” she said.

When focusing on building your brand, particularly as a qualified director, map your career and life experiences. Ask yourself:

- What are the tangible and intangible aspects of my experiences that make me stand out among my peers?
- What roles have I held and how have I been successful in them?
- What are areas of focus or special skills that have emerged in my career?
- How have I treated others?
- How do I communicate with others?
- What other resources have I contributed to my brand?
- How, if at all, have I marketed my brand to date?

Be specific. Ask for feedback on your answers from those who know you best, given that we often underestimate or overestimate both our professional and interpersonal skills. When you have all that data, step back and look for themes:

- How do people perceive you?
- What adjectives do others use to describe you? Are you outgoing, serious, deliberate, methodical, courageous, or edgy?
- What are the themes of expertise that you hear most often?
- Do you consider yourself ready for the boardroom, or do you have room to grow?

Building a brand can happen organically through the years, but most people will also benefit from making a concerted effort to refine and focus how others perceive them. “Anyone can do this. We all have our own sets of experience and knowledge,” said Bonime-Blanc.

In addition to strengthening your brand as a potential director by taking on nonprofit board roles, look for and accept speaking engagements, publish blog posts or articles in targeted publications, and create your own branded website. Get active on social media. Create LinkedIn and Twitter profiles, and update and post to them with frequency and consistency. Tie all your social media, business cards, and websites together. And, of course, network, network, network to extend your brand. If you need help, there are executive consultants and coaches who specialize in this area.

When used strategically, social media can help you increase your visibility, position your experience, and gather and share thoughtful information related to your expertise.

Socializing on Media

Social media, particularly for business and personal branding, may seem overwhelming, and for some executives it is uncharted territory. Many don't understand how to use it, don't see the benefits, and don't think they have the time to engage in it. When used strategically, however, social media can help you

increase your visibility, position your experience, and gather and share thoughtful information related to your expertise.

For example, a few years ago an international business executive working in the United States was one of the few board directors with a Twitter account. He began using social media when he recognized its value as a tool to communicate authentically and professionally. He has now grown the number of his followers to thousands across industries and countries.

Business leaders do have limited time and therefore should use social media strategically. Discretion must also be exercised lest a topic affect a specific company or shareholders for whom you serve. Yet cultivating a social media profile, according to some users, is a give-and-take proposition. One key to efficiency is to spend the bulk of your time contributing to rather than consuming social media. If you are consuming social media, one director suggests that you follow people you respect; local or international sources for information not covered by mainstream media; and interesting contributors or company employees, rather than actual companies. Then, share this information with your followers to bolster your own thought leadership. Other tips include:

- **Cross-pollinate your brand.** Publish an article on one platform, then tweet a link to the article.
- **Utilize Google alerts.** Set company- or executive-specific alerts to receive and share instant updates and trending information on topics and people in which you have interest.
- **Consider the platform.** When curating your social media presence, consider what type of content is shared and consumed on each medium. Facebook has become more of a personal platform. Alternatively, LinkedIn is seen as a professional networking tool, while Twitter crosses into both personal and professional realms.

As you apply these lessons, social media posts that are thoughtful, informative, and interesting will help you to gain more followers and expand the reach and impact of your personal brand. When it comes down to the essentials of personal branding and social media, Bonime-Blanc said it best: “It’s about making choices and about being brave, too.” ■