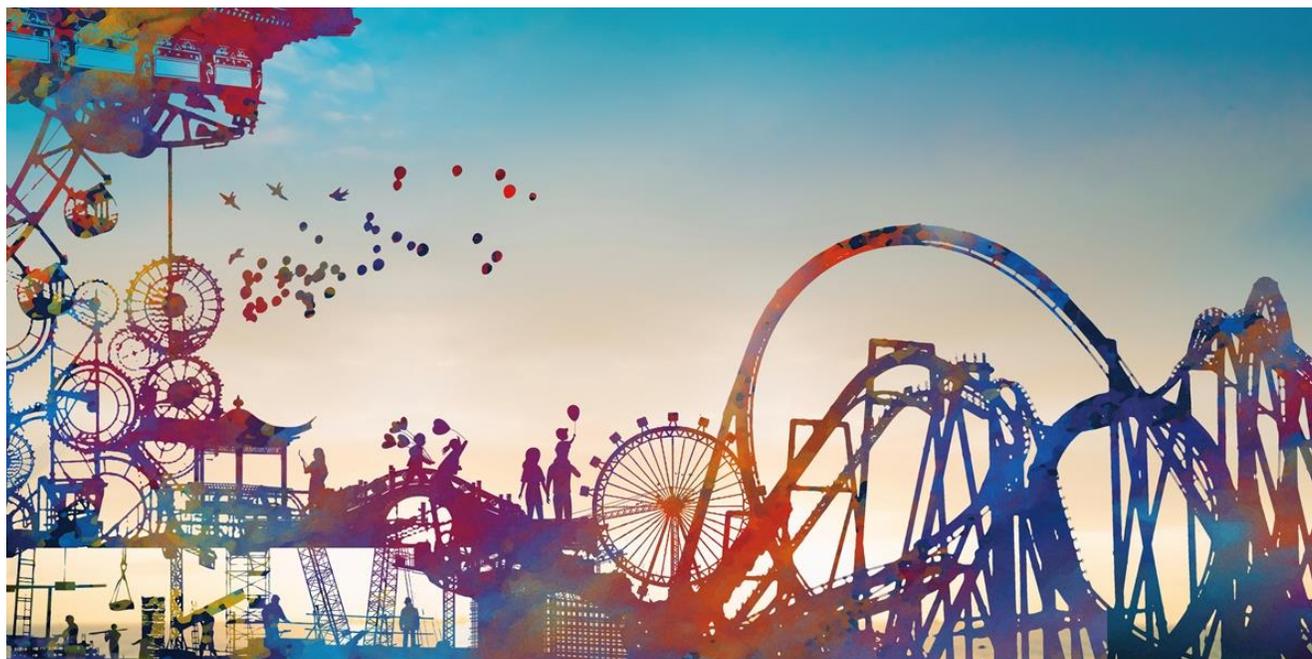


Personal Brand's Wild Ride



Karl D. Speak

This is the first of a two-part series of reflections on personal brand.



For some, personal branding is self-consuming and for others it is self-empowering.

Beginning in the early 2000's a small group of us "founding fathers" of personal brand were working hard to establish this crazy new idea as a powerful career development tool to meet the dramatically changing employment landscape. The simple idea behind personal brand was that business professionals should treat their career as a personal equity. Our advice was to treat their career as a brand to be managed, just like corporations manage their important assets. We were offering a practical, relevant adaptation of corporate brand building skills that could work on a personal scale.

Today personal brand is suffering from an identity crisis. For some, personal branding is what fuels the annoying side of social media with its excessive self-promotion, hyperbole, and inauthenticity. While others realize that building a strong personal brand is serious business, critical to “owning” their career and lifestyle aspirations. For some, personal branding is self-consuming and for others it is self-empowering.

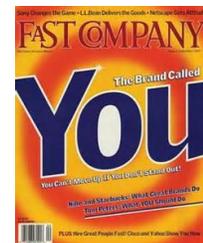
Unfortunately, the loud and boisterous side of personal brand is turning too many people away, limiting its use and threatening its existence.

The course of personal brand going forward needs to be sorted out and put on a solid footing. Before we can do that, it will be productive to learn how we got to this point.

20-Years Ago the Revolution Began

About 20 years ago, the idea of personal brand had humble beginnings as a consultant’s clarion call to white collar workers of the Baby Boom generation to avoid being so complacent about their careers. Frankly, it was “yet another” provocative consultant buzz phrase designed to stir up audiences of corporate middle managers, creating more speaking opportunities.

Tom Peters, provocateur of business trends, in an incredibly popular article [“Brand Called You”](#) published by Fast Company in 1997, introduced the concept of personal brand. Arguably one of the more important articles ever published by Fast Company, it captured the fascination of many in the business world on two levels. The first was the bold suggestion of the impending sea change in the traditional employer-employee contract that was beginning to take place in the 1990’s. Secondly, symbolized by the cover art of the magazine, Peters’ was passionately advising individuals to become “brand managers” of their careers.



At that time, for individuals in the corporate world, the idea of personal brand was a radical notion and so it was viewed by most as a curiosity. Corporate employees thinking of themselves as a personal brand that was exclusive of their employer's corporate brand seemed like a crazy idea. After all, at that time it was routine for individuals, especially loyal employees, to perceive their careers solely in the context of their employer's brand, e.g., IBM'er or 3M'er. There were even more extreme descriptions of employees who completely subordinated their career to their employer's brand, e.g., a very loyal IBM employee would be described as "bleeding blue," blue being the dominant color in IBM's corporate identity signature.

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Following WW II, the implicit employer-employee contract was a simple quid pro quo, in exchange for company loyalty and conforming behaviors, corporations would provide the implied promise of career-long employment, a pension and an upwardly mobile lifestyle. In essence, employees unknowingly traded off the distinctiveness and power of their personal brand for the implied loyalty of their corporate employer. For all intent and purposes individuals were not even aware they had a personal brand, outside the context of their employer.

The fertile ground for the emergence of personal brand was created when Baby Boomers began to feel the foundation of their career shaking. Stable employment was no longer a safe bet as corporations began large-scale layoffs in response to economic turmoil and pressure from shareholders. The blue chip, stalwarts of the economy were no longer the unshakable pillars they once were. For instance, IBM laid off 60,000 employees in 1993; in the same year Sears laid off 50,000; followed by AT&T dismissing over 40,000 in 1996; Boeing in 1998 fired 28,000 employees. The prospect of being laid off began to shake people's confidence in the long-term employment part of the employer/employee contract.

The other important part of the traditional employer/employee contract was the promise of a pension. Beginning in the mid-1990's defined benefit pensions were being replaced with defined contribution retirement plans. The message was clear the responsibility for a secure retirement was being shifted from the employer to the employee, with a little help from the company.

Employees were being forced to take responsibility for their retirement. In less than 10 years and by 1996, 30 million people placed more than \$1 trillion dollars in 401K plans, reluctantly taking charge of their retirement. As corporations were shirking their responsibility for their employees' future, it became obvious to individuals that the brand they could trust the most was the one in the mirror.

This disruption in the conventional lifetime employment contract was a wake-up call for business professionals. This awakening spawned a dramatic change in the way individuals perceived their career and their relationship with their employer. The idea of personal brand soon became a relevant idea for many corporate employees, no longer would it be perceived as "yet another" consultant's buzz phrase. In the mid-to late 90's that implied employer-employee contract began its gradual transformation and it has never been the same since then.

The possibility of personal brand was created by the weakening of corporate brands and the erosion of employees' trust with their employer.

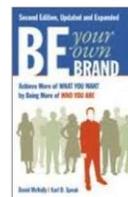
Times They Were Changing and Personal Brand Was Gaining Traction



By the time the 21st century arrived career success that had been predictable for almost 50 years had become disrupted, depending upon the success of a corporate brand was no longer a safe bet. Up to that point personal brand was not relevant to most business professionals, at best it was viewed a curiosity of those reading trendy business publications. Enterprising individuals were looking for tools that would enable them to be more innovative with their career development.

Personal brand's time had finally arrived. The idea that personal brand was the asset that would ensure one's future was intriguing and business professionals were eager to learn more. Building a strong personal brand was a new skill for almost everyone, yet there was no text book waiting in the library.

The initial advice for individuals was to build their personal brand by applying the principles corporations were using to build their brands. To be clear, those of us advocating the idea of personal brand were encouraging individuals to manage their careers as brands. Our intent with personal brand was not to de-humanize a person or suggest that they “package” themselves, devoid of their authentic personal character. Our aim was to personalize the brand building process for the benefit of individuals. A framework for building a strong personal brand, analogous to a corporate brand, would require strategy, discipline and consistency. (*[Be Your Own Brand](#)*, a book I co-authored in 2002, was the first book to show how to adapt corporate brand principles to build a strong personal brand.)



Personal brand was conceived as a framework for personal empowerment. It was a call for individuals to exercise their authenticity and act on their purpose. We encouraged individuals to define themselves independently and authentically - declaring one's personal brand as a true reflection of who they are, based upon their individual values and aspirations.

It was a battle cry to take charge of your personal brand, value it and manage it. Building a strong personal brand was the best way to be proactive in managing one's career.

Personal brand's time had arrived. An intergenerational transition was on the verge of taking place and business professionals' loyalty would be to their personal brands. We were entering an era where the focus on personal brands would stay front and center, while the role of corporate brands would take a back seat in managing one's career.

Modern Generations View their Career Through a Personal Brand Lens

Business professionals of today's generations and personal brands grew up together and needed each other. Personal brand was a curiosity of Baby Boomers, but for members of the Gen X and Gen Y generations it was perceived as an innovation whose time had come. The career expectations of today's generations needed a disruptive innovation and personal brand seemed to fit the bill.

Today's career is not like your father's Oldsmobile. If you plan to have 20 or more jobs in your career (and that's the average for today's professional), success will depend more on your personal brand than any corporate brand. Make no mistake about it, today's workplace is more competitive than ever and building a strong personal brand has become an essential part of proactively managing a successful career.



The “portfolio career” is another career innovation pioneered by modern generations. Individuals embracing this non-traditional career path plan to have a variety of different “gigs” to support their generation’s creed of “I don’t live to work; I work to live.” A portfolio career consists of stringing together a series of gigs that fit into one’s lifestyle preferences, independent of the rigid corporate career. Building a personal brand is an essential and powerful way to managing a successful portfolio career.

Personal brand is me-focused and that resonated with character traits of modern generations, especially Gen Y. While Baby Boomers introduced the idea of the Me Generation, subsequent generations took that ethos to the next level. Many of the outstanding character traits of the up and coming generations, such as their individualistic nature, self-focus, and emphasis on self-actualization resonated well with the idea of personal brand.

As the largest intergenerational transition in our workplace was set to take off, personal brand had found its place as a credible, innovative career management strategy.

At about the same time another cultural phenomenon was taking off that was soon to take personal brand out of its comfort zone and on a bender, throwing it into a mid-life crisis.

Social Media –

“People are inflating themselves like balloons on social media.”

In the ramp-up to the Great Recession personal brand as a career development tool was gaining traction and acceptance among business professionals. At the same time, seemingly on a parallel track, social media was racing along its journey to change our culture.

By 2007 social media growth was on a tear, LinkedIn had 13 million users and Facebook had 20 million. By 2012 LinkedIn had over 200 million users (adding more than 2 users a second) and Facebook was up to almost 1 billion users. Today LinkedIn has more than 260 million active users and Facebook has over 2.5 billion active monthly users.

In many ways, LinkedIn became the embodiment of personal brand we envisioned at the turn of the century. Company’s embrace of LinkedIn as a proactive tool for recruitment was a testament that we were truly living in a “personal brand world.”

Many of the mass consumer social media platforms, like Facebook, YouTube or Instagram, were running on their own paths. For these sites sharing between friends and family, amassing “likes” and personal connections became the name of the game. Attracting personal attention became the zeitgeist of the social media universe.



Brand is the language of business and not personal connections. All that changed with the arrival of social entrepreneurship. Social media entrepreneurs are in the business of making money by leveraging a digital network of personal connections. Hence the connection between social media and personal brand was created. Personal brand is a valid concept for social entrepreneurs, but to associate all social media activity, as crazy as it can be, to personal brand is a disservice.

In an effort to promote their popularity on social media and tap into the potential prosperity of social entrepreneurship, many people characterized themselves as “brands” and soon social media hijacked personal branding.



In the pursuit of “friends” and “followers” social media’s culture became drunk on hyperbole, inauthenticity and blatant self-promotion. Personal branding was gaining the reputation as the tool for selfish personal puffery. The self-promotional excesses of social media tainted people’s idea of personal brand.

For many, personal brand became associated with shameless self-promotion. This skewed view turned-off many to the idea of personal brand and ultimately slowed its adoption as an innovative career management tool. The idea of personal brand was not only side tracked from its original intent, for many it was placed into another orbit.

I am not suggesting that social media and personal brand are at odds. Frankly without social media tools like LinkedIn, the growth and power of personal brand building would be limited. Like all tactical tools, social media is best used in service of building a strong personal brand, not becoming it. The tail shouldn’t be wagging the dog.



As Personal Brand's Crazy Ride Has Slowed Down – What's Next?

So, what is the status of personal brand today and going forward? It's not clear. In some ways it's become everything and is at risk of becoming nothing. A simple search on the phrase personal brand on Google or YouTube, will prove to anybody that the idea of personal brand is almost ubiquitous. To characterize personal brand as clickbait is an understatement. The definition of personal brand and the formula for building a personal brand has been extended long and wide, its texture has been stretched so thin its practical use is in jeopardy.

Personal brand is struggling with an identity crisis. What will be the fate of personal brand as it navigates through its identity crisis? Will personal brand prefer the fun, frivolous lifestyle of the fast, foot-loose social media party? Or is it time to reposition personal brand to get it back on purpose as a serious tool for career development?

I remain optimistic about the power of personal brand as a tool of personal empowerment. After working with thousands of people helping them embrace the power of personal brand, I know it works and I have observed the sense of empowerment it creates for individuals. I am not ready to give up on personal brand. I am ready to share some practical wisdom so more people can put the idea of personal brand to use for their benefit and happiness.

Stay tuned.



Karl D. Speak

Karl D. Speak is a thought leader known for his development of key innovations in brand building. Karl's innovative work on corporate brand strategy, personal brand and internal brand building has been implemented in companies around the world. His best-selling book, *Be Your Own Brand*, has been translated into 12 languages and through its multiple versions has sold over 100,000 copies. Karl's pioneering work in internal brand building has added to the principle understanding of brand management.

Karl's work on personal brand has impacted hundreds of thousands of business professionals through the Broadview training programs based upon the personal brand content he developed. The digital app, *Broadview Personal Brand Discovery Tool*, has been used by thousands of business professionals around the world.

For more that 35-years Karl, through his consulting assignments at Brand Tool Box has worked with a wide range of corporate clients. Clients such as 3M, American Express, AT&T, BASF, BMW, Cabela's, Consumers Energy, FedEx, Honeywell, IBM, Lowes, Mosaic, Motorola, Securian, Skandia, Sony Corporation, St. Jude Medical, Syngenta, Target Corporation, Scotts Miracle-Gro, *The Wall Street Journal*, Toro, Voya Financial and Walgreens have benefited from Karl's brand expertise and internal brand building programs.

As a respected thought leader, Karl's perspective has been reported in many different media outlets such as The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg BusinessWeek, BrandChannel, NPR, NBC, CBS, ABC, Leadership Excellence, La Gaceta, Irish Times, Lavanguardia among many other publications. Karl also serves as an "expert witness" in legal cases involving matters relating to brand.

Karl holds a Masters Degree in Economics from the University of Minnesota. He has taught in the MBA programs at University of Minnesota, Saint Thomas University, and has been guest lecturer at University of Westminster in London, Capella University, ESADE University in Madrid, University of Minnesota, St. Thomas University, among many other academic institutions.