

Personal Branding – “Me Inc.”

Introduction

Why is a goal by Beckham enjoyed more than a goal by any other player? Why do we have people build temples for Amitabh Bachchan (a famous Indian filmstar) and not for any other equally successful movie star? Does the answer lie only in the talents possessed by these individuals or something beyond that? Do these personalities “brand” themselves and consciously do or refrain from doing things that affect their brand image?

A BRAND may be defined as a name to which a set of associations and benefits has become attached in the consumer's mind. This name could be that of a product, a service, a corporate entity or even an individual.

There are numerous examples of people who have become brands. Internationally, numerous names across industry sectors and occupational profiles come to mind including Madonna, Armani, Michael Jackson, Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, Richard Branson, Mother Teresa and so on. In the business arena it is a widely accepted fact that dynamic CEOs become intrinsically linked to the companies they represent. (Eg. Jack Welch, Lee Iacocca). As such it is important not only for a company to brand its offerings but also its people and its leader.

This paper attempts to look at branding people and understanding the concept behind “Me Inc”.

The personal branding philosophy

Personal Brand - A personal identity that stimulates precise, meaningful perceptions in its audience about the values and qualities that person stands for. (Peter Montoya)

It was branding guru Tom Peters who started the personal branding movement with an essay that appeared in *Fast Company* in 1997 under the title "The Brand Called You." Peters wrote, "Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding. We are CEOs of our own companies: **Me, Inc.** To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called 'You.'"

Peter Montoya, author of *The Brand Called You*, believes the key to personal branding is knowing how you are perceived by others. Montoya writes, "Personal branding lets you control how other people perceive you... You're telling them what you stand for -- but in a way that's so organic and unobtrusive that they think they've developed that perception all by themselves.... When done right, it's irresistible." (Personal Branding Press, 2002).

Just like companies brand their products to create some unique associations in the minds of the target consumers, personal branding also involves the creation of strong, unique and favorable associations in the minds of the people around. But unlike products which have a conscious marketing program to build and maintain brand values, personal brands are built unconsciously. Even if a person does not play any role in branding himself, others will automatically create some associations about him depending on his nature and habits. Therefore one should play an active role in creating a brand for oneself. (Julie Fuimano)

The need for personal branding

Various authors have different views on the need for personal branding. However, all of them agree that a personal brand plays the same role as any brand does – of differentiating a product, service (or person) from others.

Steve Van, author of *Get Slightly Famous*, points out the following advantages of branding oneself:

- Differentiate yourself from your competition
- Position your focused message in the hearts and minds of your target customers
- Confers “top of mind” status
- Increases authority and credence of decisions
- Places you in a leadership role
- Enhances prestige
- Attracts the right people and opportunities
- Adds perceived value to what you are selling
- Earns recognition
- Associates you with a trend
- Increases earning potential

Peter Montoya however says that a personal brand does not:

- Cover up incompetence
- Make you famous
- Get you to your goals

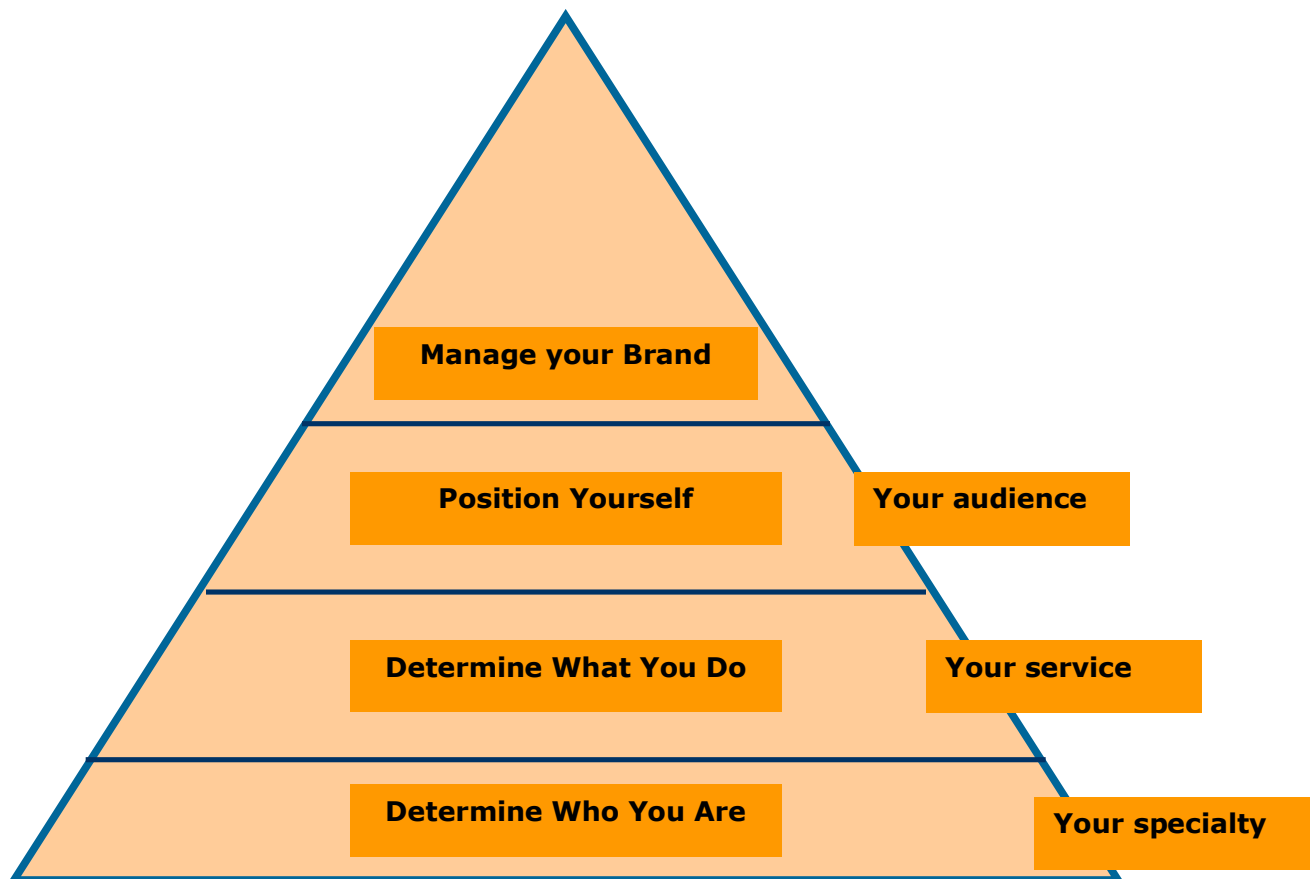
and suggests that an individual should develop a Personal Brand:

- When you feel unrecognized for accomplishments
- When others are achieving goals you set for yourself
- When you feel you have gone as far as you can conventionally
- When you want an edge over your competition.

How to create a personal brand

Creating personal brands is very much like creating any brand. We must decide the brand elements, give meaning to them, position them, communicate the meaning and manage it over time. According to marketing consultant Kristie Tamsevicius, an underlying assumption of personal-branding philosophy is that each of us has unique gifts and a distinct purpose in life.

The personal branding pyramid can be shown as follows:



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Determine Who You Are

Since personal brands have a direct reflection on the person, to identify our personal brands we must ask ourselves – what do I do that makes me different (Tom Peters). We must identify our greatest strengths and most noteworthy personal traits.

Personal branding is about determining who you are at your core authentic self, rather than inventing a brand that you would like to be perceived as. One's personal brand emerges from the search for identity and meaning, out of which comes an awareness of personal strengths and talents.

It also involves determining ones brand elements - making conscious choices about the people to associate with, the clothes to wear, the food to eat, the place where to stay, the way of speaking in public and in private etc. It is essentially telling the world who you are through visible cues.

Determine What You Do

This involves writing down ones greatest area of professional interest or passion. This reflects the kind of work one wants to do in life. It involves asking oneself - What do I do that adds remarkable, measurable, distinguished, distinctive value? What do I do that I am most proud of ?

Personal branding is not applying an attractive mask, it is understanding what ones values are, and learning to make these values relevant to other people. Much of developing a personal brand centers on identifying personal values.

Position Yourself

By identifying the qualities or characteristics that make a person distinctive from his competitors or colleagues, one can create a positioning for himself. What have I done to make myself stand out? What would my colleagues or my customers say is my greatest and clearest strength?

While promoting brand You, everything than a person does or chooses not to do communicates the value and character of the brand. Everything from the way of handling phone calls, to the email messages, to the way of conducting business in a meeting is part of the larger message that is sent about a personal brand. Just like it is true for products and services, good personal brands stand apart from others and create strong favourable and unique associations. The aim of every personal brand is to be clear, distinctive, and be easily understood, and to expresses a unique, compelling benefit that people believe in.

Manage Your Brand

According to Montoya, the key to any personal branding campaign is "word-of-mouth marketing." The network of friends, colleagues, clients, and customers is the most important marketing vehicle that a personal brand has got. What they say about the brand is what the market will ultimately gauge as the value of the brand.

The personal brand must establish a place of trust and relevance in the prospects minds. The more it is believed by people, the more it will spread throughout the market without pushing.

To evaluate how is brand You doing it is necessary to obtain honest, helpful feedback on the brand performance, growth and value. The next step is to work to close the gap between what the brand is today and how it wants to be perceived by others.

Case Study: Sachin Tendulkar (a very successful Indian cricketer)

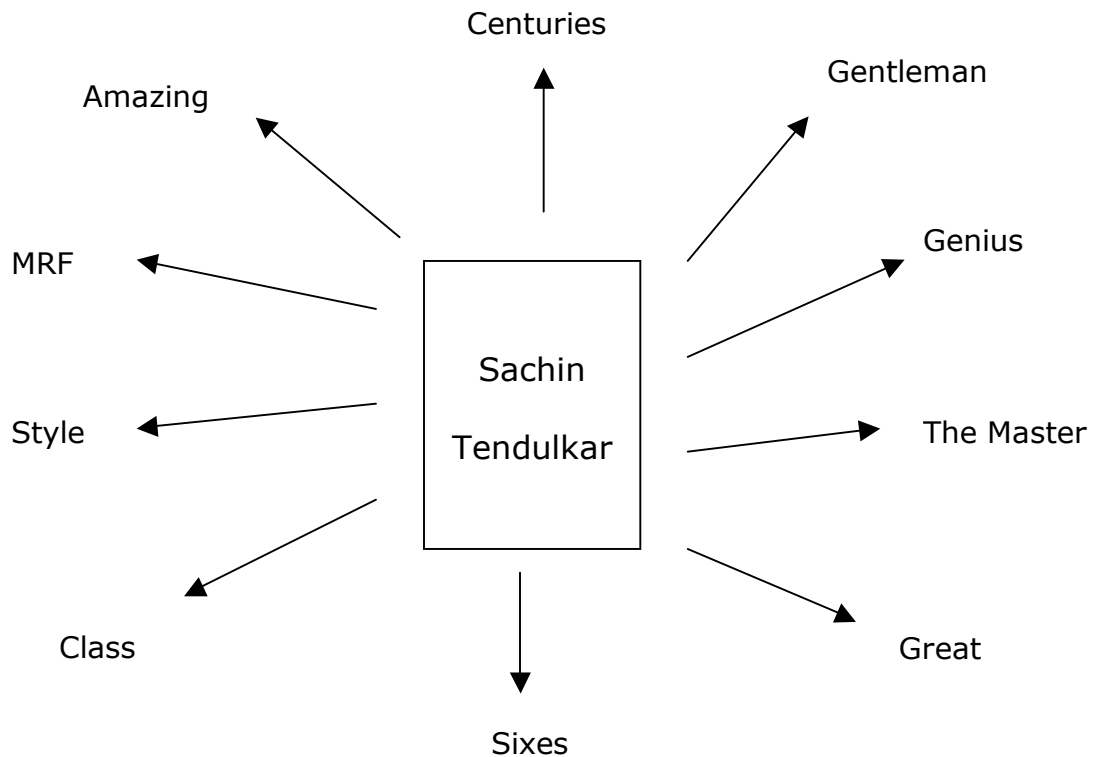
To test the various concepts of personal branding a survey was conducted with the following five questions:

1. What is the first word that comes to your mind when you think of "cricket"?
2. Who is the first person that comes to your mind when you think of "cricket"?
3. Which word(s) comes to your mind when you think of Sachin Tendulkar?
4. Which one would you prefer more, a 50 ball century by Sachin or a 50 ball century by Saurav Ganguly(Indian cricket team captain)?
5. Which one would you prefer more, a 65 ball century by Sachin or a 50 ball century by Saurav Ganguly?

The results of the survey are as follows:

- **40%** of all respondents said that "Sachin" was the first thing that comes to their mind when they hear cricket. Other associations with cricket were – cricket bat (20%), TV and sponsors (15%), crowds (10%) and others like tradition, Lords etc.
- An overwhelming **85%** of all respondents said that "Sachin" was the first person that comes to their mind when they think of cricket. Some other names were Brain Lara, Don Bradman and Viv Richards.
- To the answer of the 4th question 65% of people would prefer Sachin, 30% Saurav Ganguly and the rest were indifferent.
- To the answer of the 5th question 60% of people would prefer Saurav's knock over Sachin's (40%).

Sachin elicited the following associations:



One of the strongest associations with Sachin was that of centuries and runs. It is an association that he has built through consistently performing successfully in match after match. Thus it can be seen that the evolution process of individual-based brands is derived from the abilities/talents of the person.

It is an association that can be attributed to no other Indian cricketer and therefore makes him 'unique'. It is also a 'relevant' association as it demonstrates his successful performance of that role. Thus, Sachin has successfully established an 'individual-brand', by offering unique associations that are relevant to the target consumer.

But these unique associations on their own do not establish Sachin Tendulkar as a strong brand providing his viewers with a reason to watch him perform again and again. In addition to these associations, he also provides his viewers with a set of differentiated, relevant and motivating reasons to watch his performances.

This includes his `batting style', `spirit' and `behaviour' (both on and off the field).

By analyzing the above associations it can be said that there are three essential elements to Tendulkar's personal brand:

- He is extremely good at what he does, which greatly enhances the quality perception of his brand.
- He is consistent and inspirational which gives his brand the sheen of reliability.
- He is completely untouched by murky dealings, which lends his brand durability.

Another thing that is remarkable about Sachin is the way he has maintained his values outside the cricket field. He has firmly refused promotions by liquor and tobacco majors even after being offered very hefty sums. It is these strong principles and ideals he holds is what people admire about him and this makes the brand Sachin a symbol of hope, of Indian achievement and values, and of grace under pressure.

There have been many other cricketers who have acquired fame on their skills and talents but they haven't been able to create successful personal brands of themselves. Eg. Shane Warne, who is considered to be a legendary spinner, could not build a successful brand for himself because of his off the field misdemeanors. His personal brand thus lacked faith and wholesomeness to which people could relate to. The brand Shane Warne elicited associations which were strong and unique but not favorable.

Brand Sachin: Adherence to the 8 Laws

Peter Montoya has developed eight laws or principles for successful personal brands. (http://www.petermontoya.com/mt_what_is_personal_branding/laws.htm)

1. The Law of Specialization: Sachin has always focused on his core strength which is with the cricket bat. He has always created the image of cricket first. The survey confirms the fact that people associate cricket with Sachin.
2. The Law of Leadership: He is considered the best batsman in the modern era and second only to Don Bradman. He is the undisputed leader in his field.
3. The Law of Personality: He has created a very respectable and credible personality that is highly regarded by friends and foes alike. He has always communicated the image of working hard to overcome his flaws.
4. The Law of Distinctiveness: He has always presented himself with finesse and epitomized passion, elegance, style and dominance.
5. The Law of Visibility: Cricket being a very popular sport has guaranteed him high visibility. Through consistency in performance and his personification, he has managed to sustain the public's interest in his brand.
6. The Law of Unity: He mirrors the same image both on and off the field. He has always acted in consistence with his core values and beliefs and always stayed away from any controversy.
7. The Law of Persistence: He has never wavered from his core persona: spirited, competitive, stylish, determined, passion and humility.
8. The Law of Goodwill: Each and every association about Sachin are positive and wholesome. It is hard to think of a man who is loved more intensely and with greater devotion and admiration than Sachin.

Conclusion

Personal branding is still a relatively new concept with considerable scope for further research. It is a concept that is waiting to catch the fever of a large part of the population which still remains largely ignorant of its concepts. But increasing competition and the need for people to break the clutter and shine above their colleagues and competitors, will force a more serious approach towards personal branding.

Personal branding will also develop as people feel the need to be heard and to be able to position themselves in a world of increasing competition. Where one person is just like another in terms of skill sets and experience, it will be the personal brand that will act as the differentiator.

However, personal branding is not without its share of critics. Columnist Lucy Kellaway, labeled personal branding "a hybrid of homespun psychology, self-help and dressing for success." She went on to say, "It is born from the idea that each of us 'owns' our career and that we are never going to get anywhere unless we set out consciously and strategically to market ourselves for all we are worth. I am not a brand and neither are you. We are people, which is not the same thing at all." Her conclusion: "Personal branding is distasteful for being blatantly ambitious, sneaky and superficial. Worse, it is surely bad for business... The more you focus on Me Inc., the less you are likely to be focusing on the job in hand" (*The Financial Times*, 4 December 2000).

The choice is always ours.

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