

Personal Branding – A differentiator between successful and mediocre entrepreneurs in the South African education and training industry

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ABSTRACT

We are living in very exciting times characterised by advanced technology, easy and fast means of communication, the globe that has been metamorphosed into a global village, shopping that is no longer confined to brick and mortar boundaries but that is now online, inter alia. This new environment, whilst exciting, is fraught with a plethora of benefits and challenges and in addition to these phenomena, there is an introduction of serious competition where competitors are no longer just local but have become, national, regional, continental and global. With the advent of new dynamics introduced by a changed environment, personal branding and self-development play a pivotal role in elevating entrepreneurs and their businesses to higher pedestals. It is imperative for any entrepreneur or leader to master a skill of developing a personal branding programme in a strategic way. This research leads to the development of a strategic personal branding model that entrepreneurs in South Africa can utilise to create a personal brand. Following some simple steps, entrepreneurs aspiring to be successful in their businesses can have more opportunities and a better positioning in their entrepreneurial activity. The study will first follow a literature review of relevant works in personal branding theory. The second objective of the study is to present the model developed by the researcher, which will be used, by entrepreneurs in South Africa, in creating a personal branding plan. The study is based on a cross-sectional observation research method, conducted on a sample of 50 entrepreneurs in the education and training industry, in Gauteng province, within South Africa. The results identified the needs and aspirations of entrepreneurs who demonstrated a serious lack of knowledge on matters of personal branding but at the same time willing to implement a personal branding strategy. The study came up with a model that any aspiring entrepreneur can apply in order to have a personal brand that benefits the business.

INTRODUCTION

This research paper positions Personal Branding as a differentiator between successful entrepreneurs and mediocre entrepreneurs in the South African education and training industry.

There are a number of entrepreneurs running training institutions within the education and training industry in South Africa but most of such entrepreneurs have a glaring lack of understanding of the importance of personal branding. The training industry is lucrative for entrepreneurs as there is an urgent need to conduct activities that are geared at closing the skills gap in the country. Such training and development interventions contribute to the poverty alleviation efforts and this is one of the key elements of the National Development Plan of South Africa as a country. Most training companies are either not growing or they die a natural death in their first 5 years and this is due to the fact that entrepreneurs who are founders of these companies do not have excellent personal brands that can attract both funding and clientele to ensure business sustainability and continuity. The success of an organisation depends, very much, on the leader of that organisation. The world reads and perceives the traits and abilities of an organisation's leader by simply studying the personal branding on a leader.

Napoleon Bonaparte, cited in Willink and Babin (2017), made a profound statement on leadership which says "If you build an army of 100 lions and their leader is a dog, in any fight, the lions will die like a dog. But if you build an army of 100 dogs and their leader is a lion, all dogs will fight as a lion". This statement makes it vividly clear that the success of any organisation hinges on the ability of its leader to lead as well as the way that particular leader is perceived or viewed. It therefore stands to reason that if a leader plays such a critical role in the success of an organisation, the leader must, of necessity, be exquisitely branded to ensure that both the leader and the organisation are seen in good light and have the clientele more confident to deal with such a company.

This paper starts with literature review, where extant literature on personal branding has been interrogated. Definitions and relevant theoretical frameworks for personal branding are discussed. The literature review will inform the conclusions and

recommendations that will be done after the data is collected, collated, analysed and interpreted.

For this study, the research methodology employed is the Cross-Sectional Observation Research Method. The observation was conducted on the personal brands of entrepreneurs in the education and training industry. The observation sought to identify the knowledge levels of personal branding as well as the impact of that knowledge on the business success. The findings are discussed together with conclusions before recommendations are proposed to ensure capacity building among South African entrepreneurs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Personal Branding

The term 'personal branding' was first used by Tom Peters in his FastCompany article where he said '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' (Peters 1997). Whether one accepts it or not, the key aspect of personal branding is that everyone does have one, or what Peters (1999 cited in Shephard 2005) calls 'a sign of distinction' and we either have to manage our own brand or someone else will manage it for us. (Arruda 2005 cited in Shephard 2005), said by 'nurturing your brand ... will ensure that you get out in front of the pack'.

(Gorbatov et al., 2018) define personal branding as "a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based in a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery".

(Bolino et al. 2016) define personal branding as "a proactive work behaviour that employs marketing strategies and tactics to achieve career benefits in three distinct ways: strategic, differentiated, and technology based." The scholars further highlight that while some other self-presentation behaviours from the same nomological field,

such as impression management, may be both conscious and unconscious, “personal branding is strategic, which means that the activities are coordinated and point in a defined direction, targeting a specific audience. Secondly personal branding achieves differentiation of the marketed self, conveying valued and unique individual characteristics against the competition or the frame of reference”. (Parmentier et al., 2013) buttress the same idea stating that personal branding signals benefits or communicates a promise to deliver an outcome valued by others, while fitting into the expectations of a field.

Brewer (1991) and (Leonardelli et al,2010) reinforce the above definition but explaining differentiation as “optimal distinctiveness,” or the competing needs for assimilation and inclusion and the need for differentiation from the in-group). The component of the above definition that includes the technology resonates with the submission of (Pera et al., 2016) ; (Pagis and Ailon, 2017) who highlighted that personal branding today heavily relies on technology as the primary vehicle to convey imagery (e.g., logo, photos, and work samples) and related storytelling to the target audience. Textual and visual performances make personal branding tangible and real.

Technology also allows career seekers to estimate the effectiveness of personal branding activities, which is essential for sense making and applying any corrective measures when necessary. To summarise the definition of personal branding, a personal brand is a set of characteristics of an individual (attributes, values, beliefs, etc.) rendered into the differentiated narrative and imagery with the intent of establishing a competitive advantage in the minds of the target audience.

From the reviewed literature and having explored the above definitions, there are four characteristics of personal branding that stand out, namely:

Strategic – this is where personal branding is achieved by engaging in the activities that are coordinated and point in a defined direction, targeting a specific audience. This explains that fact that when one wants to develop a personal brand, he or she must engage in activities that are coordinated and which point in a certain direction and targeting a certain class of people. An example is that, if one is an entrepreneur with a training business, one must package himself as an expert trainer and loaded with knowledge needed by the groups of people in need of his training.

Differentiation - this where personal branding achieves differentiation of the marketed self, conveying valued and unique individual characteristics against the competition or the frame of reference. This characteristic ensures that the entrepreneur becomes the preferred service provider as he is perceived to be better than his competition.

Value proposition – this is where personal branding signals benefits or communicates a promise to deliver an outcome valued by others, while fitting into the expectations of a field. This characteristics ensures that an entrepreneur provides a value proposition of the services that he offers which are needed by his targeted audience.

Medium of Communication – this is the technology used to communicate personal brands, over and above the physical communication of brands. The technology used for personal branding includes social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn etc.

Everyone has a Personal Brand

It is an open secret that every human being has a personal brand. Our individual personal brand can either be negative, neutral or positive. People's brands are easily recognisable where, for example, when people are discussing and they mention a name, you either get an immediate remark such as "what a great person!", or "what a very rude person" or "my comments are reserved on that person". These comments come from people that have interacted with an individual and formed an opinion based on that individual's personal brand. A personal brand is made up of one's biography, qualifications, working experience, knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours, appearance and name (James,2009). Holloway (2013) adds to what James (2009) highlighted by stating that a personal brand consists of values, drivers, reputation, behaviour, skills and image. Personal branding does not only affect those that know us but even those that we meet for the first time.

William Hazlitt, the British Writer once said," First Impressions are often the truest, as we find (not infrequently) to our cost, when we have been wheedled out of them by

plausible professions or studied actions. A man's look is the work of years; it is stamped on his countenance by the events of his whole life, nay, more, by the hand of nature, and it is not to be got rid of easily” Hazlitt cited in Howe (1949). It has been proven that when we meet a person for the first time, for better or worse, it takes less than a second (390 milliseconds to be precise) to form an impression of someone's personality based on their voice (Bar *et al* 2006, Thomson 2014) and other attributes. People will always make snap judgments of a person they meet and knowledge of this fact makes it mandatory for entrepreneurs and other leaders to develop and polish personal brands. A personal brand is what people encounter upon interaction and those people form an impression or opinion based on what they read on the personal brand. Proactive entrepreneurs and business leaders will always make sure, what the public reads on the personal brand is an impression that is intended and which adds value to the business.

Strategy for Success in business : Using your personal brand as a business tool.

Personal branding is a powerful tool that can be utilised for business success. If the founder has a great reputation in the market, all his companies or businesses will enjoy the same reputation that the founder or entrepreneur has. There are modern entrepreneurs who have done so well in personal branding and one of them is Elon Musk. Elon was the co-founder of Paypal as well as Tesla. He created a brand that is transferrable where, even if he moves from one business to the next, he goes with his brand. White (2020) says “Elon's personal brand is not directly linked to the business brand. If he decided to part with Tesla, his personal brand as a successful entrepreneur would remain and he could put it to work in another organisation. Elon, a mustard-like character but no one can deny the power of Elon's personal brand. His tweets make the news and even have an impact on the Tesla share price. He personal brand effect is huge”.

Another entrepreneur with an excellent personal brand is Tim Ferriss. According to White (2020) Tim Ferriss is a prolific content creator and author. White 2020 further highlights that Tim has become well known for entrepreneurship and business. He

has used content in various forms to build a powerful brand. Tim wrote a book known as the Tools of the Titans where he used the brand equity of others to establish himself as an authority in business and small business marketing. White (2020) also highlights that Ben Francis has built a multi-million dollar brand and personal brand in the process, focusing on opening up about how he built GymShark. Ben now has a huge following across social media.

White (2020) further argues that “everything Billie Eilish does is on brand with her personal branding strategy. Her interviews, her website, her music. It is all “quirky” and experimental. She knows how to deliver her personal brand message and she has grown huge influence in the process”

It is now trendy and a shrewd strategy to gain business mileage through personal branding. The examples cited above are a tip of the iceberg. Otherwise there are a lot of examples of successful businesses which have risen to prominence by virtue of the founders personal brands.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed in this study is the Cross-Sectional Observation Research Method. The observation was conducted on the lives of entrepreneurs in the education and training industry. The observation sought to identify the knowledge levels of personal branding as well as the impact of that knowledge on the business success.

Fifty (50) entrepreneurs, in the education and training industry, from the Gauteng Province, were observed in order to identify knowledge levels of Personal Branding. In the cross-sectional observation method, there are variables that refer to entrepreneurs' knowledge of personal branding, aspirations of success in business, the image these entrepreneurs want to have in their entrepreneurial activities, the image they have in their personal lives, interest they have about social perception, the motivation that entrepreneurs have in order to

achieve their entrepreneurial goals and the main tools that they find useful in a personal branding strategy.

Premise

It is claimed that entrepreneurs in the education and training industry have a personal presence in their businesses. It is further claimed that the reputation of the entrepreneur has a direct bearing on the business founded by the entrepreneur. This direct link between an entrepreneur's reputation and the business's reputation necessitates that every entrepreneur should understand, formulate and implement a personal branding strategy. The personal branding strategy requires entrepreneurs to learn about personal development, self-knowledge and identification of solutions that will lead to excellent personal brands and result in successful businesses.

Research questions

Thus, the research questions focused on entrepreneurs' understanding of personal branding and it can contribute to the success of their businesses.

Q1: How much do entrepreneurs in the education and training industry know about personal branding?

Q2: Do businesses owned by entrepreneurs with excellent personal branding do better than those businesses owned by entrepreneurs with poor personal branding?

RESEARCH FINDINGS

From the studies conducted on entrepreneurs in education and training industry, in Gauteng, it was discovered that 10% of the entrepreneurs understood and practiced personal branding for the entrepreneurs. Of the 10% that understood and implemented personal branding, 6% were male entrepreneurs whilst the 4% consisted of female entrepreneurs.

The 90% of the entrepreneurs in the education and training industry did not understand personal branding and hence most of them are struggling in their businesses. Of the 90%, only 20% are women entrepreneurs whilst 70% are male entrepreneurs.

80% of all the entrepreneurs in the education and training space have accounts in one or the other, social media platform such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram etc.

In the process of observing entrepreneurs understanding of personal branding, it was observed that entrepreneurs are willing to have a dynamic and fulfilling entrepreneurial and personal life. It was evident from the data collect that they do not have a structured personal development strategy that depicts their values, mission and vision about their personal lives. It was also clear that most of the entrepreneurs did not understand the value of having a deliberate image they want to have and the way they can create it without departing from their personality and real feelings. The other aspects that were lacking in the entrepreneurs were the techniques about ways of self-knowledge, about identification of strengths and abilities to use them in all aspects of life. Additionally, there was a clear lack of knowledge in the methods that might help them understand what other people's opinions are about them and the way they are perceived in different social groups. Moreover, entrepreneurs also showed a lack of skills in changing negative habits and weaknesses. Whilst most entrepreneurs are already familiar with social media and digital communications, they do not have a good understanding on how social media can be used as a tool of social branding.

The above results of the cross-sectional observation methodology allow the researcher to define the entrepreneurs' main needs for personal branding that results in excellent personal brands and success for their businesses. The main needs are as follows:

Entrepreneurs need knowledge on personal branding in order for them to find all intrinsic and extrinsic, tangible and intangible aspects of the personal branding process.

Entrepreneurs also need to learn self-knowledge techniques as well as techniques to find out the way they are perceived in social groups.

Another need is to learn how to use personal branding as a tool to improve their entrepreneurial life and to increase their chances to a higher quality lifestyle. Normally, entrepreneurs would prefer to follow a model, with simple steps that help them shape a personal branding strategy. The items articulated, clearly on the model, will help entrepreneurs in their journey to a an excellent personal brand and successful businesses. These items are the basis of the following strategic personal branding plan.

STRATEGIC PERSONAL BRANDING PLAN FOR ENTREPRENEURS

The plan has four steps and follows four parts of the life of a person that are considered by this research as being the most important for personal development: emotional, physical, mental and spiritual parts of the life of a person, being the foundation of the strategic personal branding plan.

Table 1 explains what each element consists of.

STEP	STEP DESCRIPTION
1	Establishment of Vision, Mission, Values, Roles and Personal Goals
2	Personal Introspection, Self-Knowledge, Self-Esteem and Social Perception
3	Identification of personal uniqueness
4	Self Communication

Table 1. Strategic Personal Branding Model For Entrepreneurs

Step 1 - Establishment of vision, mission, values, roles and personal goals

Before starting to build a personal branding structure, a person needs to clear out the fundamental elements to live a conscious life, based on clear existential aspects that the person will follow in all the professional and personal activities they will carry out. There is a need to spell

out one's vision, mission, values, roles and goals as a first step in formulating one personal brand.

- a) **Vision** - answers to the question: which is my vision of my professional, personal and social life, both presently and in the medium and long term?
- b) **Mission** - answers to two questions: what do I want to be? Which is my existential goal?
- c) **Values** - answers to the question: which are the values I refer to within the activities I develop in different social groups?
- d) **Roles** – answers to the question: which is my role in the work I do in groups I belong to?
- e) **Goals** – answers to the questions: do I have clear goals established? What are my current goals? Recommendation: answering the questions of the five above items will help the person to clarify the basic elements that are needed to be considered in building a personal brand. They will represent the structure of all personal development decisions the person will take.

Step 2 - Personal Introspection, Self-Knowledge, Self-esteem and Social perception

Self-knowledge, increased self-confidence and knowledge about social perception, will help the person in designing achievable personal development goals. Personal introspection and self-knowledge -refers to the careful, intentional, conscious and permanent observation of one's feelings, emotions, actions and results of the actions taken. The ultimate goal of this technique is to conduct a SWOT assessment with strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of one's own life. The goal is to keep what is appropriate and to eliminate or change what the person realizes is not useful. In the same respect the role of personal introspection is to capitalize on the opportunities that arise from the informational, educational and social background that the person has. Own aspirations, passions, competences, distinctive elements that may position the person differently in social groups, the present level of personal

development, the level of emotional maturity and the personality type, are essential techniques in self-knowledge.

Step 3 – Identification of personal uniqueness

After the self-knowledge stages has been attended, the person should have the ability to identify those elements that could differentiate and favourable position it in the professional life and in social groups. These will refer to the strengths and abilities the person has and that could lead to a successful professional activity.

Recommendation: the personal uniqueness must be interconnected with all elements established in Step 1 (mission, vision, values, roles and personal goals).

Step 4 – Self Communication

Self-communication refers to the identification of online and offline channels that might be used to communicate about him / herself and that can establish social and professional networks that could be used in order to be visible in the professional and social environment.

Recommendation: making a two minute creative and original self-presentation video to be posted online, create a blog, use all social networks available online (examples: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter) and offline, attending conferences and events dedicated to a person's professional environment, participation in internships and volunteer activities. Combine all this elements a coherent way to communicate unitarily in all identified channels.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This research paper sought to identify knowledge level of entrepreneurs within the education and training industry, on issues of personal branding. The findings revealed that the majority of entrepreneurs within the training and education

industry do not understand personal branding and hence, their businesses are also not performing at optimum level. It was further discovered that these entrepreneurs do not understand how their personal brands affect their companies and that placing an urgency on understanding the concept of personal branding. The research proposes a model that entrepreneurs can apply in order to come up with excellent personal brands and this will help their businesses to succeed in their endeavours. The research started from the premise that entrepreneurs in the education and training industry have a personal presence in their businesses and that the reputation of the entrepreneur has a direct bearing on the business founded by the entrepreneur. This direct link between an entrepreneur's reputation and the business's reputation necessitates that every entrepreneur should understand, formulate and implement a personal branding strategy. It is important that when any capacity building for entrepreneurs is to be done, the curriculum should address issues of personal development, self-knowledge and identification of solutions that will lead to excellent personal brands and in turn to success in businesses. The research questions were focused on students' needs and expectations about personal branding process and on the way it can help students in their personal and professional life. It then continued with a cross-sectional observation research method, developed on 268 students from 5 consecutive generations who studied the personal branding course. The research led to important results on students' expectations and needs. The results were followed by generating a simple to apply model of strategic personal branding, that is used in the teaching process of personal branding at the faculty mentioned before. Although the research has been applied to students, the model can be extended to young professionals who do not study a personal branding course but want to advance career and increase their quality of life. The present study does not claim to be the perfect recipe, because in personal branding authenticity is the main working tool. Nor is the perfect scientific validated model, because one of its limits is that it has not yet been validated over time. But, it is believed that aspects regarding self-knowledge, social perception, abilities to work with self, time management,

online and offline networking could be easily managed by students and young professional if they have some simple steps to follow and a clear starting point. Once the strategic personal branding process starts, it can be adjusted and readjusted every time a person feels it is needed. Yes, people are different and authenticity is the key factor of a sustainable personal branding strategy, but there is a long way of introspection, self-discovering and environmental knowing till one can identify personal uniqueness and find the appropriate ways and contexts to communicate about it. As a final advice it is worth emphasizing what various professionals observed. The authentic, correct and honest personal branding efforts will always be built on truth, on the reality of the person and will always be improved by lifelong learning. The study is not safe of limits. First, limits refer to the methodological design of the study. The cross-sectional observation method is mostly used in medical research and not so often in social science. The primary motivation of choosing this method was linked to its low costs, but also for the utility it showed for the type of information the researcher wanted to find out over the years from her students. Also, the model presented was used with students coming from a single faculty in Romania, so it cannot yet be considered scientifically validated. Limits are found also related to the proposed self-knowledge and social perception tools and techniques, thus having a high rate of subjectivity. Some of the instruments come from the psychological sphere and have been scientifically validated over time, but the researcher uses in the teaching act, and proposes in the presented model, other tools, personally designed, these being still scientifically unproved. But, the usefulness they have shown in the teaching process, allows them to be presented in the academic and scientific environment, for further investigation. Based on the above information, the present study brings a significant amount of data, both theoretical and empirical. It contributes to the enrichment of the scientific research on personal branding. Additionally, it can be useful for university teachers in personal branding courses and can be subject to improvement.

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