

Professional Branding as an Interview Management Strategy

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Introduction

McKinsey and Company in 2011 reported that unemployment remained high and job creation continued to slow. There is not, nor is there likely to be, sufficient job creation for the unemployed and new entrants in the labor forces (Manyika, Lund, Auguste, Mendonca, Welsh, & Ramaswamy, 2011). For graduating students, a difficult economic environment can place challenges in the path of their career goals.

These employment challenges are not insurmountable, but require a proactive strategy. The thesis of this article is employment challenges can be partially overcome by helping students focus on critical elements of their career management strategy. Although there are many aspects to an effective career management strategy, enhancing students' value through developing a unique professional brand is a critical element to provide differentiation in the marketplace. In an environment where networking is essential to securing a student's first career employment position as well as potential for future career advancement, students must be able to clearly and concisely communicate their value(s), in terms that create a positive and lasting impression.

A one credit hour professional development course meeting one hour per week was required for all business students. The paper reports on an innovative pedagogical strategy with supporting evidence for effectively helping students better understand their own unique professional selling proposition (UPSP) and were able to convey their skills, education, and professional experience, in a compelling and memorable manner.

The challenge for students is to bridge the gap between a personal brand and professional brand. This is accomplished by combining three successful steps including a targeted elevator speech/tell me about yourself response that incorporates the student's unique professional selling proposition (UPSP); an objective-oriented resume'; and finally, an interview-capturing cover letter.

Defining Brand Value

Traditionally brand value has been discussed in terms of a product but is increasingly applied in a broader sense as a commercial brand to define a business entity (Epstein, 2004). Brand value, as a means for students to enhance their market value, requires a distinction between personal brand and professional brand.

A personal brand is everything that makes a person exactly the person they are. According to *A New Brand You*, a personal brand is similar to a commercial [business] brand in that it is all a matter of: "who you are, what you do and why anybody should care to remember you" (Epstein & Johnson, 2011, P. 22).

The person is the brand, and the brand is the person. Individuals are well-branded or poorly-branded based upon their own conscious and conscientious branding efforts.

A personal brand comprises:

- Everything about an individual as a person including how and what they think; their personality, skills, accomplishments, character, belief system, values, etc.; their tastes, how they act and judge others; their vision and mission as a person
- Everything about an individual's personal market including the one in which they live; everything about it and how it influences them; their family, friends, associates, etc.

Epstein and Johnson (2011) created a step-by-step process to aid the student in discovering their personal brand. A significant aspect of the process was the creation of the Professional Brand Profile. The questions included in the profile were specifically designed to uncover descriptors that helped define their own personal values.

For example, one question asks: If you were a business, which one would you be and why? The importance of a student's answer centers not on the "business" they choose, but in particular, "why" they chose the business. The "why" identifies adjectives and descriptors that provide insight into the student's character values. For example, a student chose Microsoft and stated that he admired Bill Gates for his innovation, entrepreneurial spirit, and philanthropic activities. The principle concept is that a student typically uses descriptors they already demonstrated in their response or one they were working hard to develop.

Personal and Professional Brands

Understanding the context in which a descriptor is used plays a critical role in brand placement. For example, when relating personal history or key experiences, often times a student used terminology such as "spiritual" or "faith-based." These words were appropriate when describing a personal brand. However, these same words would not be appropriate descriptors in a professional context, such as an elevator speech/tell me about yourself response, objective-focused resumé, or interview-capturing cover letter. Recognizing this disparity necessitated an expansion of the personal brand to a professional brand and thus adding the following elements:

- Everything about their professional market including the one they work in, or will work in; everything about the people/businesses, who and where they are, how they think; what are their career needs, their individual strengths and weaknesses
- Everything about the characteristics, skills, and experiences that differentiate them from other individuals seeking the same position; their unique professional selling proposition

Finally, to assist students in bridging the gap between personal and professional brand, students were prompted to associate personal brand expressions such as spiritual or faith-based to language that would be appropriate in a professional context. Words they chose included: honesty, integrity, moral, and ethical.

Identifying Professional Brand Values

Identifying values unique to an individual required an independent, introspective process that allowed for brainstorming and a free-flow of information. To facilitate those requirements, a professional brand classroom workshop was utilized. The workshop provided a comfortable environment where sharing and creative energy uncovered values that transitioned a student's personal brand to a professional brand, and ultimately, the ability to communicate that brand orally in interviews and in written communications. Once they identified their unique professional brand, students were encouraged to embrace the values that differentiated them from their competition.

Infusing Brand Value into a Targeted Elevator Speech/Tell Me About Yourself Response

Students only have one minute to make a positive and memorable first impression. The elevator speech continues to be an important oral component of a career management strategy. Its success depends on the effective student preparation and delivery of their professional brand value. Diane Darling stresses, "be strategic, but don't be foolish...come across as poised and polished, not ill prepared..." (Darling, 2005, p. 34). The "tell me about yourself" question is one that often causes students to stumble when asked. The "tell me about yourself" response can be used effectively when networking or when asked in an interview. The author of *"101 Great Answers to the Toughest Interview Questions"* states, "if not the first question asked, it will be one of the first three questions an applicant will be asked by an interviewer" (Fry, 2009, p. 35). Thus, communicating a student's professional brand with confidence, enthusiasm, and a 'memorable' supporting example, defines the objective of a targeted professional brand tell me about yourself response.

Once the student has identified their professional brand, he or she must present the "tell me about yourself response" in a manner that will effectively engage the listener. The student must also be alert to nonverbal responses that might prompt them to modify the speech, when it appears they may be missing the mark with the listener. It is suggested that an effective professional brand tell me about yourself response include the following components:

- Brand Name: who you are—your name
- Brand Definition: what you do as a student, professional or both— expressed clearly and simply
- Unique Professional Selling Proposition: why anyone should care to remember you; keep it short and memorable
- A Memorable Example: to support the unique professional selling proposition

An elevator speech/tell me about yourself response rubric is beneficial in assessing the learning success of an effective professional elevator speech/tell me about yourself response and should include measurements such as:

- captured attention,
- presented clearly and concisely,

- organized in a clear and appropriate manner,
- well developed,
- created interest,
- memorable example, and
- closed with positive result.

Incorporating Professional Brand Value(s) Into an Objective-Oriented Résumé

There are numerous books and articles in use by colleges and universities to address developing a résumé including Hanna, Radtke and Suggett's (2007), *Career by Design: Communicating your way to Success* as well as Mary Ellen Guffey and Dana Loewy's (2009), *Essential of Business Communications*. This article addresses incorporating the student's unique professional selling proposition; the succinct, resonant message that distinguishes the student's professional brand, and persuasively pulls the employer to their brand into an objective-oriented résumé.

One effective approach is utilizing a "skim value" résumé that quickly allows the recruiter to glance through the resume' and ascertain an applicant's professional worth to an organization. Unfortunately, many students tend to undervalue areas of their résumé such as qualifications, experience, honors, awards, and affiliations. For example, a student described his experience as a bank teller as: "worked as bank teller". After completing the workshop the student realized this experience actually included: "handled large sums of cash and credit transactions, worked effectively in a high-stress, fast-paced environment, and provided quality customer service."

By working through the professional brand profile, students improved their ability to extract their values, and subsequently transition those values into the appropriate areas of a professional résumé. The exercise also worked to improve the student's ability to elaborate and defend those same values under the intense scrutiny of an interviewer.

An assessment of learning rubric has proven beneficial in evaluating the success of an effective professional résumé. A suggested evaluation rubric might include measurements such as:

- uses appropriate font and spacing, résumé format adheres to chronological guidelines and provides the reader "skim value",
- contains all required components, experience listed is specific,
- information is quantified,
- target position is identified within the objective,
- value is presented clearly and concisely, and
- résumé highlights qualifications and experience specific to résumé objective.

Incorporating Professional Brand into an Interview-Capturing Cover Letter

The purpose of a cover letter is to get the interview. Consequently, many of the same techniques used to transition a student's value into a résumé also apply to the cover letter. The cover letter allows the student the opportunity to expand and elaborate on key factors in their résumé but should not to repeat exactly what is in the résumé.

The cover letter also offers the student the opportunity to establish the baseline for what is to follow in the résumé —getting the reader excited about their potential value to that organization. The cover letter offers key areas such as the introduction and highlighting of qualifications where student value might be transitioned, elaborated, and underscored for the reader.

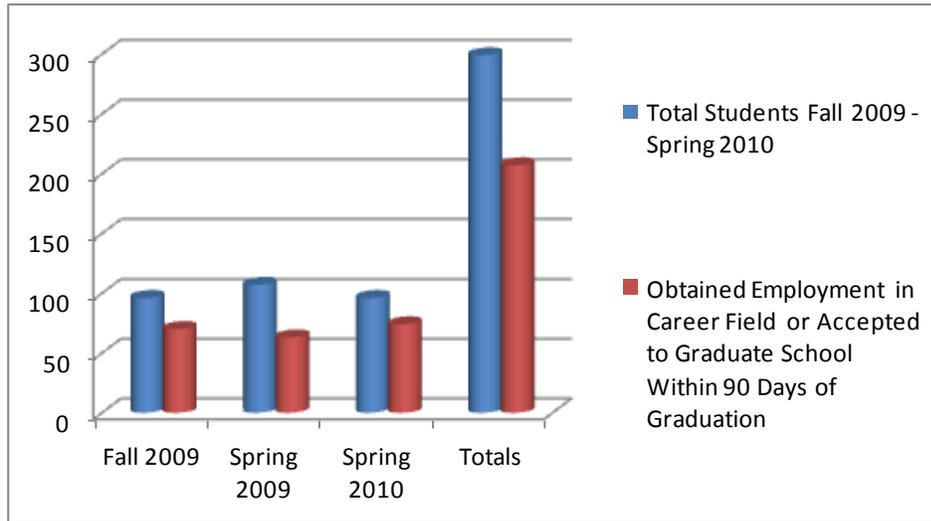
Professional Branding Workshop Results

During spring 2009 and spring 2010, students at a state university in the southern part of the United States were exposed to the concept of professional branding and the related topics of elevator speech/tell me about yourself response, objective-focused resume', and an interview-capturing cover letter in a series of workshops. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, the national unemployment rate as of August 2010 was 9.6%. The unemployment rate in individuals 25 years of age and older with a bachelor's degree or higher was 4.7% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

The effectiveness of professional branding in securing employment was measured using student surveys and telephone interviews within 30 days of graduation. Data was captured from the spring 2009 through the spring 2010 semesters to gauge the students' success in two areas: "currently employed in their career field" and "successfully accepted into law or graduate school". The feedback from the surveys and telephone interviews supported the difficult job market current graduates are entering as many have not found employment in their career field within thirty days of graduation. The charts below illustrate our findings.

Figure 1.

Success in Obtaining Employment in Career Field or Accepted to Graduate School Within 90 Days



Note. Fall of 2009; 96 students, 46 employed in career field and 24 to graduate school. Spring 2009; 107 students, 56 employed in career field and 7 to graduate school. Spring 2010; 96 students, 50 employed in career field and 24 to graduate school. Totals; 299 students, 152 employed in career field and 55 to graduate school.

One study from the Spring of 2012 suggests 53.6% of young graduates are unable find good jobs (Grandoni, Dino, 2012). Data collected over three semesters for students participating in the branding workshops indicated 69.23% of these students found employment in their career field or were accepted to graduate school. While providing some empirical support for the success of the program, words of caution are appropriate. Because the students were attending a university in a state that has been a leader in job creation, the results may in part reflect a difference in the micro economic job market these students were in relative to the national job market. In addition, of the 69.23% of the students finding employment in their field or graduate school, 26.57% of these students went on for graduate study. It is not clear from the survey if this decision reflected a career aspiration or was an alternative to not finding a job in their field after graduation.

While the empirical support for teaching branding to students may be limited, the comments by participants were unequivocal in their support. The participants were strong in their affirmation of improvement in interview skills, job placement, better focus in their resume', and confidence in hiring process. Table 1 identifies a number of participants' comments and classifies them by impact area.

Table 1.

Students' Comments on Professional Branding Workshops (company names were deleted for confidentiality)

Interview Skills	<p>"I found a job in New York City! It's a Manhattan CPA firm and I start on Monday! Your advice helped me so much in the interview with this firm. Thank you."P004</p> <p>"Thank you for the mock team interview experience. I learned a lot from having you as the leader of the group and feel that I am much more prepared for the interview process. I am very thankful that I had your class workshop and you as a teacher."P005</p> <p>"I went to work and the loan officer at our location was going to meet with two 'Big Wig' presidents from the bank. It was a fundraiser they were participating in with a local hospital. Well the loan officer brought me along to introduce me because, he knew that I wanted to move up within the bank; and also, because the meeting was on the 4th floor of the hospital. When we got to the elevator he said 'well let's hear it...your elevator speech.' So I responded with the bull-riding rodeo elevator speech that you and I worked on. They were impressed!"P008</p> <p>Ms. ABC, just wanted you to know, 9 months after graduation I landed a career job! Got picked up by XYZ as a personal Banker! Nailed 'em with my elevator speech and they couldn't say no! Success!"P009</p> <p>"Thank you so much for the Mock Interviews. They were so helpful and I think you did a wonderful job organizing it and having a variety of companies come out" P013</p>
Job Placement	<p>"I just got promoted from accountant to Financial Analyst! Thank you for all your help and advice in this process; you are the best! Onward and Upward!"P001</p> <p>"I just wanted to let you know I went on my first post college interview at a major technology company. I beat out A LOT of candidates for business systems analyst/senior service manager position. I start training on Monday! It is like the coolest experience ever. I'm going to get paid more than I could have ever dreamed coming out of college! THANKS for all your help with my professional brand, resume, and interviewing skills."P002</p> <p>"Thank you for all your assistance in your career development classes. I'm now a Regional Sales Manager for a National company that is involved in the fishing industry; which was my career objective!"P007</p> <p>"I now work as a financial credit analyst at XYZ Bank. Thank you for all you have done to teach me how to get a job."P012</p> <p>"I obtained a job from XYZ and training starts on Monday. I did implement your techniques and suggestions into my interviews and obviously it has worked!"P015</p>
Better Focus on Resume'	<p>"I really appreciate your help on my interview skills and resume. I have never seen a teacher like you to help the students; you have dedicated a lot to your job."P011</p> <p>"I wanted to tell you XYZ loved my resume! Thank you for all of your help."P017</p> <p>"I just wanted to let you know that I got the Internship with XYZ! I start on Tuesday, and I'm nervous and excited. Also, I got in touch with the District Manager of ABC, and I sent her my resume and she said she'd be happy to help me with getting started with them too! Thanks again for all of your help."P020</p>
Confidence in Hiring	<p>"Thanks for a great semester, I can't express how much I've learned and grown as a student because of this course. I REALLY appreciate it!"P003</p>

Process

“You were fabulous!!!! The workshop was a total success due mainly to your leadership, organization, communication skills and knowledge. Thank you so much. I know, that you know, that you changed lives.”P006

“Thank you so much...your class is a great class and has really helped me out so much!!!P010

“Please DON’T over stop teaching this class!! This was one of my best experiences.”P013

Lessons Learned

The course was subsequently moved from a capstone senior course to the students’ junior year. It was reasoned the move would provide students with an extra year in which to develop the necessary professional branding prior to applying for an internship. It was also intended to give them a head start on career employment research.

These types of professional branding activities assist students in reversing the tendency to undervalue their contributions to a potential employer and thus more accurately establish a unique professional selling proposition. Two illustrative examples are as follows:

Example #1

I am not sure if I told you this over the phone, and I think it is worth directly or indirectly quoting as a proof statement for Personal Branding and/or Career Management Strategies.

During my interview with XYZ Insurance, the District Manager leans back in his chair and says, "I am going be quiet now and give you an opportunity to tell me more about yourself." Without hesitation, I started my elevator speech. It flowed with ease because we had worked on it repeatedly in your class. From there, I showed him the Make a Wish Project, including the poem that I referred to in my example, backing up my UPSP.

From that point on, I felt a profound sense of euphoria in being myself, saying this is who I am and what I am about. I think I had lost focus on my conviction that I do not want to trick people into liking me as a friend, student, or employee because I am certain that I would be temporarily fooling myself into thinking that this is the right position for me.

Thank you for helping me to discover how to share with the world who I am and who I want to be with confidence. I hope that when you feel that your students are not listening or that they do not value their education, it is not because you are sharing useless tools and information. It is truly their loss if they do not utilize these tools for their benefit.

Example #2

I would like to thank you for your dedication and support for your students. After taking your class and learning the process of having a successful interview, I am glad to inform you that I have landed a better job. You told us to back up statements with examples, in following this procedure, I was ranked in the top three for a position that 56 people applied for. Thanks to your great instructions I landed the job.

Conclusions

Graduates are entering a competitive and challenging job market with the recent economic downturn. Colleges and universities have focused on preparing students with a skill set to be successful in their chosen career path. The challenge for many graduates is securing a position where they can use their skill set to build a successful career. By helping students to develop their own unique professional brand as distinct from their personal brand, they gain a competitive advantage in the employment market. By incorporating their professional brand in a targeted elevator speech/tell me about yourself response, objective oriented resume', and an interview capturing cover letter, individuals are required to engage in self-reflection and self-evaluation, qualities essential for success in competing in the job market. Many students suggest their self-confidence and ability to communicate why they are desirable candidates is enhanced. The process of developing a professional brand encourages students to reflect on the kind of organization where they could best contribute, thereby facilitating a process of self-selection while encouraging individuals to focus on where their talents could be used most effectively.

While recognizing that a skill set for securing a job is not a substitute for having career skills and knowledge associated with success in one's profession, strong career skills may not be of great value if one cannot secure a position in which to use them. Students who participate in the workshops are more likely to have the opportunity to demonstrate their talents because they have secured a challenging and appropriate position with a desired organization. Given the high cost of higher education today, students, parents, and taxpayers are increasingly demanding accountability of colleges and university. The professional branding strategy is one of the ways to help meet this challenge.

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