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ESMT Technical Note

Applying the principles of branding to build personal brands

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Introduction

In this note you will find a summary and an overview of the principles of branding, as well as an illustration of application of these principles to build personal brands. We will review the principles of branding, apply these concepts, and generate a tangible and useful outcome – your personal brand plan. In 1997 Tom Peters wrote a seminal article titled *The brand called you*. He defined personal branding as "the 'feature-benefit' model that the brand called 'you' offers" and explained that a personal brand is an idea that comes to mind when people think of a particular person.

It is important to understand the concept of personal branding because you already have a personal brand: Given that brands reside in the mind of consumers, the way other people perceive you is undeniably part of your personal brand. Actively building a personal brand helps you define who you are, what you want, and why an employer should hire you. As the audience uses brands as shortcuts to make decisions, you can develop your personal brand to help others remember you and recognize you for what you do best. If you have a clear and strong personal brand, your audience can see you as a solution to a specific problem, trust you, feel good about you, and ultimately connect with you. Using several sources, in this note we present a summary of the principles of branding. The framework, which is composed of five principles, reflects a general rather than detailed approach to branding and can serve as a tool to review the major branding principles. Next, we will apply these principles to help you build your personal brand.

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Defining the brand

A brand is a tool used in business to communicate information or concepts that are connected with a good or a service. According to the American Marketing Association, a brand is "a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." (AMA 2003) Thus, brands can be thought of as a conceptual lens through which consumers see what an organization is offering. The first step to build a strong brand is to define the brand identity.

Brand identity is what the organization chooses their brand name to mean (Aaker, 1996). The brand identity conveys at-a-glance the distinctive attributes of the organization, builds awareness of and an attitude toward the organization, and paves the way for new relationships with customers. As part of the brand identity, we can define the brand's value proposition, which is a statement on the functional, emotional, and self-expressive benefits delivered by the brand and that provide value to the customer (Aaker, 1996).

Defining the personal brand

Much like a brand describes what the organization is, a personal brand describes who you are. To define the brand identity of your personal brand you can engage in self-reflection: What are your values? What are your passions? What are your goals? How are you different from your peers? What do you do that you are most proud of? A thorough assessment will help define your brand identity and value proposition.

A simple tool to determine your most important values is the "Rokeach value survey" (1973) presented in **Exhibit 1**. Personal values can be instrumental, which are values that serve as means to achieving your ends, or terminal, which are values that can be thought of as goals that you want to achieve in life. First, read the list of terminal personal values and rank them in order of importance. In other words, what is most important for you to achieve in life? Second, read the list of instrumental values and consider the extent to which you use each of these values as a guiding principle in your life. For example, how important is it for you to be hard-working? Think about each value and rank them from the most to the least important. Note that ranking your values from a list of important values might be more difficult than it seems, so give some time to this task and carefully consider these values in light of your life. From these rankings, you can identify your top three instrumental values and your top three terminal values. Now that you have a clearer idea of what is most important to you, it will be easier to make decisions that involve value trade-offs.

Your passions can be thought of as things you are enthusiastic about. Think about the things that excite you; the things that you would like to do at any time of the day on any given day. Think about the things you would like to do when you are relaxing. Or think about the things you used to like or liked to do when you were a child. Write down your top three passions.

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To assess your goals and get insights on the pursuit of your goals, we recommend an exercise developed by Kegan and Lahey (2009). The authors propose that people suffer from "immunity to change," which prevents them from doing what is needed to do to achieve their personal and professional goals. The authors combined insights from adult development psychology and organizational consulting to create an effective process that can bring about change. Kegan and Lahey argue that following the five-step framework would not only lead people to discover their goals and the hidden resistance to these goals, but would also help them to design solutions that lead to successful changes. The process to overcome the "immunity to change" is divided into five steps (refer to **Exhibit 2**):

1. In the first step, you are asked to identify your improvement goals. These goals should be defined in positive or approach terms rather than negative or avoidance terms and should be important to you. If a given goal rates less than 5 on a scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 7 (extremely important), it is not an important goal. An example of a goal is "to become more productive" (rather than "to stop being unproductive").
2. In the next step, you are asked to think of and write down any behavior that you engage in and that works against the achievement of this goal: For instance, pursuing perfectionism (prevents you from being more productive).
3. Next, you need to specify the risks of doing the opposite of the behavior that works against your goal (described in step 2). In the example that we are using, what would happen if we do not pursue perfectionism? The risk of not pursuing perfectionism is that the work would be "imperfect" and would have shortcomings.
4. In the fourth step, you have to describe the most deeply embedded assumptions of how you think the world works. Such an assumption is thought of as a belief that leads to or explains the behaviors listed in the second step and that are impeding goal achievement. In our example, the assumption that explains pursuing perfectionism is that "when work is not perfect, then it is not good." This is the belief, or assumption, that leads to the behavior ("perfectionism"), which, in turn, is preventing your goal ("to be more productive") from being achieved.
5. Following this diagnosis of what prevents you from achieving your goals, you can move to design simple tests of what would happen if you act against these assumptions. One such test could be "not revising any work a third time." After repeatedly running such tests, hopefully you will figure out that your assumptions do not always hold and can be relaxed. Upon reflecting on the findings, you should be able to overcome the "immunity to change," stop engaging in the behaviors that are preventing you from achieving your goals, and eventually achieve your goals.

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To define your strengths, we recommend completion of the survey of character strengths developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004).[a] The test considers 24 strengths (e.g., judgment, critical thinking, open-mindedness, hope, optimism, future-mindedness, appreciation of beauty and excellence, love of learning) and ranks them for you upon completion of the survey, highlighting your top five strengths.

This set of information should help you define your brand identity and value proposition: A short and concise description of what you do and how you add value, benefit, and quality. Questions that can help to define one's brand identity and value proposition include: What do you do for customers? What problems do you solve? Why do people do business with you? What kind of solutions do you provide? An example of a value proposition is "I help companies find ways to improve their marketing activities so they can reduce their costs and increase their profits" (instead of "I'm a consultant").

Defining the market/audience

The audience carries perceptions about brands and associates them with a set of expectations.

Although organizations define and communicate their brand identity, the audience decodes the brand communication to form a brand image, and thus brands are said to reside in the mind of the audience. When brand identity is strong and well communicated, brand identity and brand image overlap to a great extent, if not fully.

Brand image can be defined as perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory (Keller 2001). It is what consumers feel and think when they hear or see a brand name, including perceptions of brand personality. Brand image refers to the associations that consumers have with the brand.

Given that brands are associated with a set of information, concepts, and expectations, the audience uses brands as shortcuts to facilitate their decisions. Thus, it is important to define the target market to adjust brand identity and brand image according to the audience. In his chapter *Creating customer advantage*, Joachimsthaler (2007) describes the demand-oriented brand management approach developed by BMW: By listening to the audience and adjusting brand identity according to consumer perceptions and to what resonates with them, BMW managed to significantly reduce the gap between brand identity (how they define their brand) and brand image (how customers perceive the brand).

[a] Seligman, M. Authentic happiness. University of Pennsylvania. http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/questionnaires.aspx (accessed June 3, 2013).

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Defining your audience

Likewise, it is important to define the target market of personal brands. Who is the audience with whom you want to connect? Who exactly are they? Where are they? Is there another segment that matters? Write down who your audience is, including your customers, colleagues, and even competitors.

Listening to the audience through market research

Market research helps brand managers in several ways, including but not limited to: understanding the audience's psychology and behavior, examining how the audience perceives the brand, comparing the position of the organization (brand identity) with the audience's perceptions (brand image), uncovering new markets or developing new ways to connect with the audience. It is recommended that organizations learn how the audience experiences the brand via experience maps (Aaker 2011, refer to **Exhibit 3**). For example, a business school may learn about their MBA students' experience with the program: From their excitement at the start, the frustration and struggle toward the end, and the pride upon graduation. Organizations may also discover the touchpoints that resonate to identify how the brand connects to customers and turn them into loyal customers. Although there are several research methods and tools that help brand managers listen to their audience, Keller's customer-based brand equity model (2001; **Exhibit 4**) offers an excellent framework to approach a brand audit via surveys or interviews with consumers.

By listening to the audience through market research, organizations may adjust their value proposition and/or communication efforts to strengthen their brands. For example, a brand identity-image gap analysis allows the organization to compare whether their desired identity is being perceived by their audience or by different segments of consumers in the way that it is intended. Such analysis and adjustments can help a brand resonate and connect with customers on a deeper level.

Finding out how others perceive you

When building a personal brand, it is important to know how others perceive you. This may be difficult given that you might have never heard the truth. Finding a mentor who is willing to point out your strengths and weaknesses can be very helpful, though unfortunately this is not always possible.

One way to find out how others perceive you is to ask people who know you to help you by completing a survey. You may create a survey featuring a list of attributes and questions or you may use an existing one, such as the survey provided by Arruda and Dixson (2007). You can email this survey to people who know you well and can give you honest answers. If you think that

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confidentiality may be an issue, you can recreate this survey using a questionnaire software to make sure the responses remain anonymous.

Following the collection of essential information, you can conduct a brand identity-image gap analysis. Is brand identity consistent with brand image? Is there anything in the audience's perception that is worth strengthening? Do you want to change anything in your brand identity? This can help you identify the strengths you want to highlight, the weaknesses you want to address, or other adjustments you want to make on your brand's value proposition.

Managing brands over time

Strong brands are well positioned in the market. Although the American Marketing Association's definition of a brand (see page 2) leads us to think that brands focus on differentiating their offerings from each other to make them unique. However, brands should also implicitly show in which market that offering is competing. For example, Coke is different from Pepsi, and both compete in the soft-drink market. Careful positioning of a brand in the market leverages the points of parity vis-à-vis its competitors and, at the same time, highlights the points of difference (Keller, Sternthal, and Tybout 2002).

Strong brands are also well managed over time. A good tool for this is Keller's brand report card (2000; **Exhibit 5**). Keller identifies ten characteristics shared by strong brands to propose a systematic way for managers to rate their brands' performance. Used repeatedly over time, this tool helps brand managers to maintain their brands' success along the way. For example, it is possible that as competition increases the brand's benefits will be rated as less unique or valuable. An early detection of such trends can be vital for maintaining a brand's standing.

Such management efforts are necessary but are not sufficient conditions for brand success. What sustains the success of brands over time is authenticity and the ability to deliver what is promised.

Managing your brand

Some of the same tools used to manage corporate brands can be used to manage personal brands. For example, how valuable are the benefits that you offer to your audience? How consistently are you communicating your brand's value? Even aspects like price can be thought of as components of a personal brand (e.g., salary, consulting fees).

As the manager of your personal brand, you should manage all of the touchpoints with your audience to communicate your brand identity. A personal brand environment (office, communication material, etc.) should be managed to consistently reflect your value proposition.

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As in brand management, to manage and maintain a successful personal brand both the brand identity and the value proposition must be genuine and you must deliver on your promise. This consistency over time will reinforce your brand image in the mind of the audience.

Communicating value

Organizations should communicate their brand identity and their value proposition. Messages are communicated not directly to consumers but via codes that are decodified by the recipient of the message. Organizations should use codes wisely to enhance the chances of the audience interpreting the message in the way that it is intended. Codes include but are not limited to form, application, visual, sensorial, typographic, and haptic experiences, aesthetic, stories, episodes, scenes, as well as written or spoken words associated with the branded-product.

Brand managers should learn how to use these codes to facilitate consumers' interpretation of the brand communication and connect to customers at deeper levels. Compared to attitude strength, brand attachment has been shown to be a better predictor of purchase behavior, brand purchase share (share compared to immediate competitor brands; e.g., Coke vs. Pepsi), need share (share compared to extended competitors; e.g., Coke vs. Evian), and difficult behaviors such as relationship maintenance (Park et al. 2010). While attitude strength refers to an overall certainty that a given brand is good, brand attachment is a personal connection with the brand, an emotional bond that makes consumers perceive the brand as if it is part of themselves. To help the formation of brand attachment, brands should connect emotionally to consumers. A good understanding of the audience paired with effective communication that promotes such emotional connection can help toward that goal.

Highlighting your value

Although everything related to you communicates your brand identity, you can build a communication plan to express your brand and highlight your unique value. Choose codes that are consistent with your brand identity and value proposition. This will facilitate your audience's recognition of your message and will pave the way to build relationships. Highlighting your values may seem like a narrow niche strategy, but this is a good path for emotionally connecting to your audience, those who indeed value what you have to offer.

Identify the tools that you will use to communicate your unique value proposition (e.g., website, social media). This will help you become visible and memorable. Eventually, consistency in communicating and delivering your value proposition will help establish a strong connection with the people who matter to you, just like brands should aim at establishing resonance and relationships with customers as a way to sustain strong brands (Keller, 2001; Rust et al. 2009).

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Closing remarks

Regardless of whether you wish to improve your brand position or reinvent yourself completely (Clark 2011), the steps to be taken are the same: Applying the principles of branding to build your personal brand. These principles include defining the brand, defining the market, listening to the audience, managing your brand over time, and communicating value. This note provides a brief review of branding principles, an exercise to apply these principles, and a tangible outcome as a result: your personal branding plan.

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Exhibit 1: Personal values

Instrumental values	Terminal values
_____ Ambitious (Hard working, aspiring)	_____ A comfortable life (A prosperous life)
_____ Broad-minded (Open-minded)	_____ An exciting life (A stimulating, active life)
_____ Capable (Competent, effective)	_____ A sense of accomplishment (Lasting contribution)
_____ Cheerful (Lighthearted, joyful)	_____ A world at peace (Free of war and conflict)
_____ Clean (Neat, tidy)	_____ A world of beauty (Beauty of nature and arts)
_____ Courageous (Standing up for your belief)	_____ Equality (Brotherhood, equal opportunity)
_____ Forgiving (Willing to pardon others)	_____ Family security (Taking care of loved ones)
_____ Helpful (Working for others= welfare)	_____ Freedom (Independence, free choice)
_____ Honest (Sincere, truthful)	_____ Happiness (Contentedness)
_____ Imaginative (Daring, creative)	_____ Inner harmony (Freedom from inner conflict)
_____ Independent (Self reliant, self-sufficient)	_____ Mature love (Sexual, spiritual intimacy)
_____ Intellectual (Intelligent, reflective)	_____ National security (Protection from attack)
_____ Logical (Consistent, rational)	_____ Pleasure (An enjoyable, leisurely life)
_____ Loving (Affectionate, tender)	_____ Salvation (Saved, eternal life)
_____ Obedient (Dutiful, respectful)	_____ Self-respect (Self esteem)
_____ Polite (Courteous, well-mannered)	_____ Social recognition (Respect, admiration)
_____ Responsible (Dependable, reliable)	_____ True friendship (Close companionship)
_____ Self-Controlled (Restrained self disciplined)	_____ Wisdom (A mature understanding of life)

Note: Instrumental values: Characteristics or means to achieving your ends; Terminal values: Goals or the most important things to attain in your life.

Source: Rokeach (1973).

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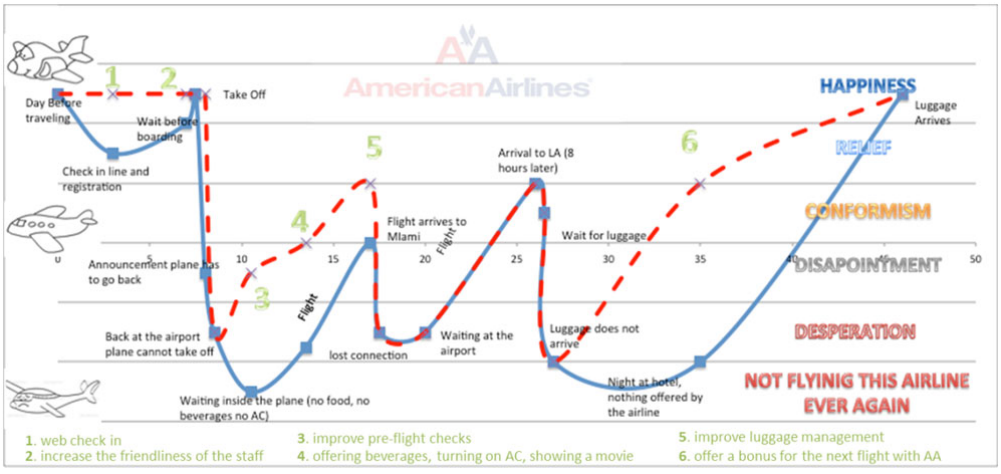
Exhibit 2: Immunity to change framework

1. Your improvement goals (the commitments that you have)	**2. What you are doing or not doing that prevents your goals to happen?**	**3. Your competing goals** (commitments that "have us")	**4. Big assumptions**	**5. Experiment**
Must be real Must be important		What would you be worried or concerned about if you do not do or do the opposite of what you listed in #2?	What are you assuming? Why do you do what you listed in #2?	What would you have to do to test the real severity of these assumptions?
e.g., be more productive	*e.g., perfectionism*	*e.g., I would worry that the work is imperfect* *What are the consequent behaviors of these assumpti ons? (The commitments that have us)* *e.g.,obsess over details*	*e.g., if work is not perfect, it is not good*	*e.g., don't revise your work a 3rd time* Take small steps to free yourself from the commitments that have you!

Source: Created by the author based on Kegan and Lahey's *Immunity to change* framework (2009).

Exhibit 3: Experience map



Note: 1-6 are potential interventions to improve the customer experience.

Source: Course assignment, ESMT MBA Class 2012 based on Aaker (2011).

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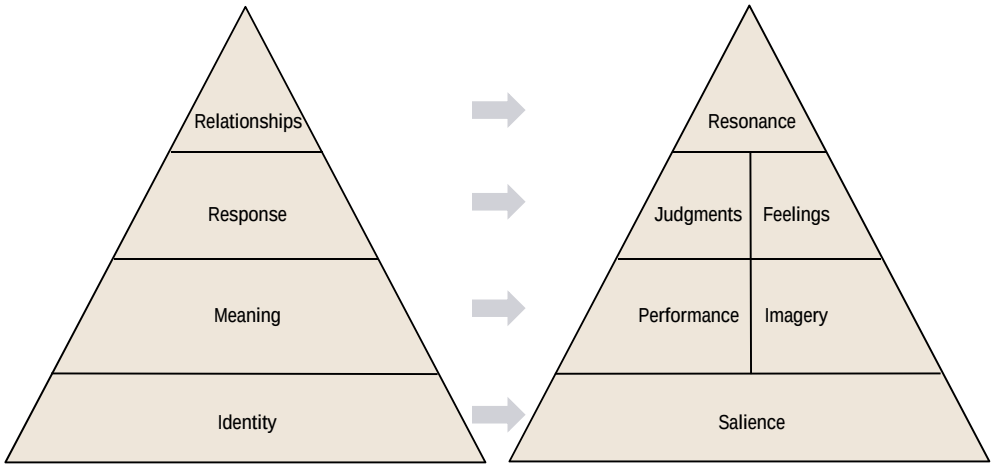
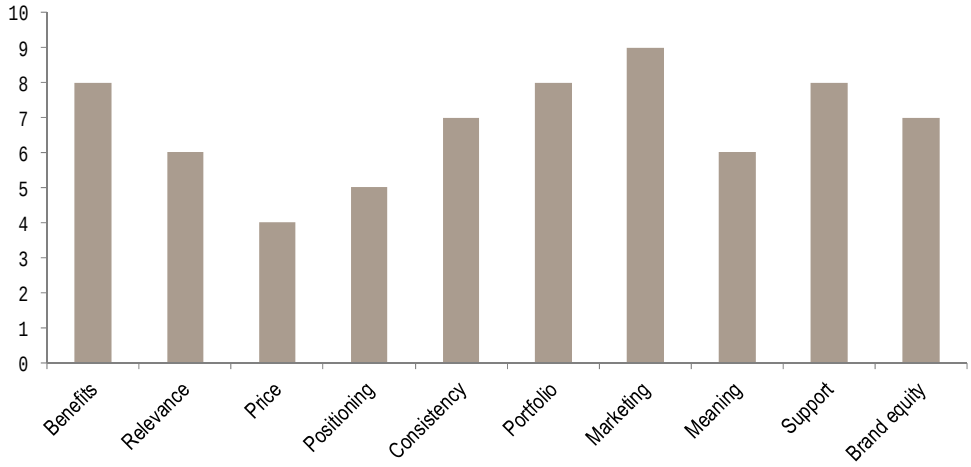
Exhibit 4: Customer-based brand equity model pyramid



Source: Keller (2001).

Exhibit 5: Brand report card



Source: Created by the author based on Keller's *Brand report card* (2000).

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