

E-COMMERCE & INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Put best cyberspace face forward



By PAUL COPCUTT

It's been almost 10 years since Tom Peters first wrote about the concept of personal branding in the *Fast Company* magazine article "The Brand Called You" and it's only now are we starting to realize and embrace the importance of branding ourselves.

Having an online brand can be beneficial for any professional, especially for accountants, who deal with so much competition in the marketplace.

Benefits include identifying and communicating differences to stand out, getting noticed to secure a new client, or being hired for that next great job.

Branding is no longer just for the large corporations, such as Nike or Coca-Cola.

You can be assured that just as you are using the web for your research, your business contacts and prospects are checking you out online through various search engines, including Google. It is critical to know what is being said or not said about you.

A survey of executives conducted by ExecuNet in 2006, entitled "Growing number of job searches disrupted by digital dirt," reveals that while the vast

majority of the executives – 82 per cent – expect companies and recruiters to enter their name into a search engine, 33 per cent have never actually conducted a search of their own name to determine what information about them is online.

This is more than just egosurfing. Other surveys have shown that significant numbers of business people are using search engines, like Google, as one of the first steps in gathering knowledge about people with whom they want to do business. It's imperative that you come up in those searches if you want to get ahead.

A survey, conducted by Harris Interactive for the search engine Dogpile said about 23 per cent of adult Internet users in the U.S. have searched online for their customers, workers, potential employees, supervisors or prospective managers.

So where should you start?

First, it's a good idea to get a baseline of where your online identity is now. That can be done quickly by looking at Google and seeing how many hits you have on your name. If it's a common name then it might take a little more work in sorting through which hits are yours.

If you have no online identity or very few hits, that's OK, it's something that can quite quickly be built upon, but if there is digital dirt on you, that's a whole different story.

You will need to work a little harder to ensure positive online identity items start to come up above those carrying the potentially damaging digital dirt.

“Personal branding works well because it's all about identifying your unique abilities.”

Paul Copcutt, personal branding strategist

Websites such as Zoominfo (www.zoominfo.com), LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) and Ziggs (www.ziggs.com) can help get you on track.

According to the ExecuNet survey, 35 per cent of recruiters who use sites such as Google and Yahoo! to check the background of job seekers have eliminated a candidate from consideration based on the information uncovered online – a significant increase from 26 per cent just one year ago.

Once you know what your baseline is, it's a good idea to spend some time developing what your online identity says about you.

Personal branding works well because it's all about identifying and leveraging your unique abilities, allowing you to maximize your strengths.

You should do some introspective work in this area but also take the time to gather some external perceptions about who you are from colleagues, friends, managers and even clients.

Also you must identify your target audience – who needs to know about you so you can start to attain the goals you have set.

With all of this information, you can now define your brand statement – 15 or so words that grab your audience's attention. Then ensure this statement is consistently used across all aspects of your online and offline identity.

It needs to become an integral part of your profile so that people start to recall and describe you in that same way.

You can now begin to build your online identity by posting your profile on sites such as

Zoominfo, LinkedIn and Ziggs.

Also, find other more relevant social network sites that you know your target audience uses.

Realistically, no one has an unlimited budget or time to start doing all the things that global brands do. Luckily you won't need those things.

Communicating your brand online narrowly will increase the

developing a website can take a lot more time and money, and updating and maintaining it can be either technically challenging or expensive.

- You can start to track other blogs that are relevant to your area of expertise and post comments that add value to their conversations. Each time you post something it helps raise your Google ranking.

- Many professional organizations or associations have online forums where you can contribute advice or your opinion and again raise your profile.

- If there are books you have read that are relevant to your target audience go to Chapters or Amazon online and post a book review – again this raises your Google ranking.

But a word of caution: Remember, whatever you post online is available for the world to see.

There have already been some high-profile cases of business people being exposed for making fictitious claims – or worse.

The best advice I can give is to think about this question before you put anything online: Would you be happy to see it appearing on the front page of your local newspaper?

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