

PERSONAL BRANDING IN JOURNALISM

by

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ABSTRACT

This project focuses on the ways that student journalists can create a brand for themselves while still in college to make them better job candidates upon graduation. Over the past year and a half, I have worked to brand myself as a student journalist by creating an online portfolio to display my work and building brand consistency through five different social media sites. In the broadcast journalism industry, most job applications are online, thus creating a need for students to start building value in their name and work in college. By following the tips and guidelines outlined in this paper, I was able to create my brand as a reporter to land competitive internships and receive job offers before graduation, which proves the importance and validity of my work.

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INTRODUCTION

Personal branding is the act of marketing ourselves to others. Everything that a person does online shapes the way people think about that person. The Internet gives ordinary people the opportunity to create and manage a brand based on their achievements, interests, and professional experience. Gone are the days of mailing in a cover letter and resume to apply for a job. Most employers, in my experience, have asked for e-mail submissions only. With the click of a button, a future employer can Google a name and find a trail of a person's online presence, good or bad. With the addition of social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, reporters can now connect directly with their viewers. Many professional news organizations are even encouraging the branding of individual journalists because it, in turn, creates more value overall for the company. Connie Guglielmo, a reporter for *Forbes Magazine*, said she is required to maintain a blog and Twitter as a part of her job. Guglielmo said that many employers in the news business today are posting job requirements not only based on the number of years of work experience, but how many Twitter followers a person has. The news business has gone digital, and journalists are being required to keep up with the changing times in the industry. Student journalists need to stay ahead of the curve by using all of the tools on the Internet to their advantage to stay competitive and get hired when they graduate.

FINDING YOUR BRAND

The first step in branding is figuring out what image to portray online and how it will be perceived. The brand must be specific to a person's goals. For student journalists, that means making a decision about their professional goals within the

news industry. They must decide what kind of journalist they want to be, what kind of news they want to cover, and how they can convey this information through their brand. Rather than choosing many different topics, they should focus on the most important aspects that a future employer should know about them. Many of the branded journalists that I researched realized that their niche was the second most important aspect to display of their brand, behind their name. The professional branded journalists that I studied used the following titles for their brands: reporter/anchor, multimedia journalist, tech and business reporter, music journalist, TV host, sports anchor, weather reporter, or a combination of these. Schawbel (2010, para. 7) said, "Choose the area where you can use your experiences and personality to enhance your expertise, making you an indispensable voice on that topic." By finding a niche, people labels themselves as experts or professionals in that field. If the work displayed through a person's brand is congruent with their label, then they are adding value to themselves on that topic.

COMMON TIPS FOR BRANDING YOURSELF

When I began the quest of researching the topic of personal branding, I discovered that there was a lot of information available specifically relating to journalism. Many journalists have actually branded themselves as experts on personal branding in journalism by writing books and articles online. With the amount of information available, it can be overwhelming to decide which personal branding strategy will work the best. The common tips that I uncovered are the following: find a niche, do research on your niche, start a blog and participate on others, establish a searchable identity, own your domain name, create a Google

profile, tweet, join a professional social network, seek the input and advice of veteran journalists, participate in online chats, be a true multimedia journalist, stretch yourself intellectually (Hellum, 2010), be a quality journalist, learn social media, have something to say, and be authentic (Buttry, 2011). In my opinion, the most important tip of all is to be a good journalist. All of the branding efforts in the world will not matter unless there is substantial content and quality work to back it up.

YOUR WEBSITE IS YOUR BRAND

Many professional journalists choose to brand themselves by managing their own websites or online portfolios. Their websites are Internet pages that are completely devoted to their brand. Most journalists choose to include a bio or about me section, links to their work, a video demo reel, their resume, a contact page, photos, links to all of their social media accounts, or a blog. Their website is a representation of who they are as a person and as a journalist. It is a way to manage all of the information on the Internet about them and combine their work into one spot so an employer does not have to click on several search engine links to find examples of their stories. Having a website is a way to manage the search results that your name returns. In 2014, Shane wrote, "Like it or not Google tells your story, and the great news is we have complete control over that story via what content we produce, messages we create, and actions we take" (para. 3).

ASSESSMENT OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALIST WEBSITES

I searched through hundreds of professional journalists' websites to accurately assess what works and what does not work when it comes to creating an

online profile. The best websites were clean, simple, professional, and easy to navigate. The front page of the website can be compared with the first impression when meeting someone face to face. Since most employers are now asking for digital submissions only when applying for jobs, the homepage of a personal website is their first glimpse at who they may or may not hire for the job. Too much information on the homepage can overwhelm or confuse visitors, but too little does not hook someone to stay on the page very long. The best homepages that I viewed had at least one picture of the journalist, a bio, and maybe one or two of their latest stories. It is imperative that reporters upload their best or most recent stories to keep their page fresh and up-to-date. Other elements that some journalists used that worked well on the homepage when done correctly were a Twitter sidebar, posting a demo reel, and links to other social media accounts.

BRANDING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media makes the world a much smaller place by connecting people from all over the world. Journalists can use social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and many others in a variety of ways whether it is updating breaking news, connecting with viewers, or simply posting an update about their personal life. Social media is all about having a conversation with other people, which is key to garnering a following and keeping it. Beck wrote in 2013, "When starting out, I'd try to go 60%-40% news-non news tweets. As you start to develop an audience, drop back to 40% news (including news organization retweets), 30% non-news, 30% interacting with people and retweets of actual people" (para. 10). Today's college students have grown up using social media as a form of self-expression and

entertainment, but it can also be one of the most useful tools in branding. Student journalists should use their social media accounts to post about their stories and upcoming assignments. It is not easy to build a following overnight, but consistent, professional posts will gain some attention after a while. In Birch's (2013) article, she said the best ways to gain followers were to ask questions, inform, and use intelligent language. The top three ways to lose followers were whining about your crazy day, hashtag tweets to death, and only tweeting once every three weeks (Birch, 2013).

Creating a Facebook page dedicated solely to reporting is becoming more common among professional journalists. For students wanting to build their brand, it is a good idea to create a separate, public Facebook account just for their journalistic work. Lavrusik (2011, para. 2) wrote, "Though many journalists already have personal profiles on Facebook, public pages enable them to build a professional presence, opening them up to readers beyond Facebook's 5,000 friend limit, and importantly, helping them to separate their professional presence from their personal on the site." Having a professional Facebook account allows a reporter to have a space on the site just for work, and it protects the privacy of their personal lives. Also, in my own reporting experience, it is much easier to contact sources through Facebook than any other social media site because both users do not have to follow each other to correspond. It is important for students to display a level of professionalism in both their private and public accounts because potential sources, future employers, and viewers may be looking at both pages.

Twitter has become a go-to social media site in breaking news situations. It is easy to refresh the page on a smart phone and see updates on new stories. With only 140 characters, each tweet must be specific and concise to convey the message on a regular computer or smartphone. Students should start early in their college journalism careers and sign up for a Twitter account. This account can be used to post about their stories, events they are covering, and interact with their followers. Executive Producer at WFAA-TV Meagan Harris said that a good rule of thumb for Twitter is to never post more often than every 30 minutes, unless it is a breaking news situation that people need to know about. Through my own experimentation on Twitter, I discovered that my tweets received more interaction when I posted a picture with the words. The key is to post the picture through Twitter though, because my followers did not interact with me very much, if at all, when I posted tweets with an Instagram-linked picture.

LinkedIn is one of the newer social media sites for student journalists to utilize in their job search. It is never too early to start building a profile because many internships and jobs are posted on the site. Include any and all relevant job experience, skills, training, and areas of expertise in the profile. LinkedIn is one of the few social media sites that allows the user to see who is viewing their profile. I have a rule that I will only connect with people who have viewed my profile if I do not know the person. Some people on the site simply want to build a huge network so it is imperative to use discretion when choosing whom to connect with. While LinkedIn is not usually the typical way for journalists to find a job, I have experienced some success from creating a profile. A recruiter for a media company

that has stations across the United States contacted me via LinkedIn, and he asked me to send him my resume tape to send out to all their stations. This may not turn into a job, but this proved to be one way for employers to find and contact future employees.

YouTube has proven to be a useful tool in branding myself as a journalist. Many professional journalists upload their resume tapes to YouTube with hopes of attracting potential employers or embedding them on their own personal websites, like I did. YouTube keeps track of the number of views per video so it helps me see which videos are the most popular. So far, my resume tape has received more than 300 views, and most of my other packages and anchoring segments have been viewed between 30-60 times, with my most popular package receiving more than 500 views. While my news videos are not likely to go “viral,” simply putting my stories on YouTube is another way for me to show off my work on my personal website and social media accounts. Schawbel (2009, para. 25) wrote, “Even though your videos might not get 100,000 views, the important thing is you can leverage that video content and share it on all your branded properties.”

Instagram has taken off over the last couple of years to become another form of communication that journalists and news organizations utilize. In looking at other professional journalists’ Instagram accounts, reporters seem to gain the most “likes” when they post behind-the-scenes photos, showing things that the viewer can’t see on television. I tried to model my own Instagram account with this thought in mind, posting photos of my internships at KMID-TV, CBS, and WFAA-TV and my work with TCU News Now. Instagram has become the go-to social media site for photos, so it is

not the best place for me to share my stories. For me, it is simply another place for me to build brand consistency. News organizations are still trying to figure out how to use Instagram to benefit their needs as well. Titlow (2012, para. 8) wrote, "For media outlets, Instagram is less about driving traffic than engaging readers and extending their brand to a new, wildly popular platform." Instagram is a great tool for individual reporters to use to connect with viewers and build a following, as long as the reporter keeps a level of professionalism present in his or her pictures.

WHY COLLEGE STUDENTS SHOULD BRAND THEMSELVES

The purpose of college, from a student's perspective, is to learn as much as possible about a chosen career to (hopefully) find a good, paying job upon graduation. The value of personal branding plays into this ultimate goal by assisting students in creating an online reputation at an early age. By building a brand through a website or social media throughout college, student journalists have a tangible online portfolio that can be displayed through a simple link on their resume when they apply for a job. Hellum (2013, para. 11) wrote in a blog post, "Many multimedia journalism students post their reels on YouTube, share photos on Flickr and create online portfolios that showcase their programming skills, and it's paying off. They're getting hits, they're getting noticed and best of all, they're getting hired."

CREATING VALUE IN YOUR BRAND

Substance must be present to back up a brand. I cannot say I am a student journalist if I am not doing the work behind the title. The best way for students to put value in their brand as a student journalist in college is by getting involved in student media or doing internships. These experiences give students the content

they will need to build their online portfolio. Building a brand is not just about posting a blog or sending a tweet, a student must have something to say when posting online. There is no shortcut to success so that means students must first put in the effort to be a good journalist and then brand themselves based on their work.

BRANDING EQUALS DOLLARS

In the broadcast journalism industry, there is a delicate balance of power shared between the news division, sales division, and the consumers. The news division puts a product on the air every day, a newscast. The sales division must sell this product to advertisers so they will spend money to advertise their business or product on that particular channel. Both the news division and sales division depend on consumers for ratings. Ratings often determine whether an advertiser will buy a spot on one channel versus another. In order to keep ratings up, the news division must continually churn out quality content and have likeable people as on-air talent. Viewers connect with people and stories so it is highly important to have a solid news product first and foremost for the other aspects of the money side to fall into place.

Students in college are immediately placed at a disadvantage when applying for jobs against seasoned journalists simply because students have not had the airtime to prove they can bring in good ratings. By branding themselves during college through working hard as a journalist, posting on social media, and creating an online portfolio, students can create value in their brand. When I apply for jobs, I will be able to show an employer the number of people who visit my website, how many YouTube views my stories have generated, and how many followers that I

have on social media. This will serve as a bargaining tool to show how my brand worth will translate to ratings. News anchors, like recently retired WFAA-TV anchor Gloria Campos, have name recognition and a small level of fame within the market they represent. It used to take news anchors and reporters years to build this brand because television was the only medium they could use, but with the tools available online, it provides journalists with multiple ways to build a following. By starting the branding process in college, it places students at a better advantage down the road to possibly bargain for higher salaries.

STEPS TO BUILDING MY OWN WEBSITE

On my course to branding myself, I felt it was necessary to create my own website to feature my background, work as a student journalist, and other interests. The first step that I took to brand myself was buying my domain name. There are several services available on the Internet for people to purchase a domain name, but I chose to go through godaddy.com, which had been recommended to me by one of my professors, Kent Chapline. I originally wanted to use kendallmorris.com as my domain, but unfortunately, that domain was already registered to another user. I could have gone through negotiations to obtain that specific domain name, but it would have cost me more money than I was willing to spend. Instead, I settled for kendalldmorris.com and paid only \$10 for a two-year agreement with the help of a promo code I found online. Godaddy.com offers packaged deals to host and create websites, but they charge monthly fees and limit the amount of pages, disk space, bandwidth, and the amount of images. Since I am a student on a budget, I looked for a website that would host my page for free. Wordpress.com and weebly.com were

the two best free options that I found. I looked through hundreds of journalists' websites to help make my decision. Each of these two website hosts has pros and cons, but I chose weebly.com because it offered a more professional look, as opposed to wordpress.com, which looked more like a blog format.

Weebly.com had all of the options that I needed to create my website. I could choose the design, colors, amount of pages, and add any element that I wanted to each page. When I made the decisions about design for my website, I decided to keep it clean and simple, without too many distractions. I wanted my website to be a glimpse of who I am in a nutshell. I originally chose a light purple color for the background because it represented my love for TCU, and it was also a calming color that was not too bright. I designed a photo header for my homepage that showcased some of my professional headshots and journalism experiences. I wrote a brief bio that included my educational and work background. If a future employer were to visit my website, he or she would have seen my future ambition, interests, and work experience all from viewing the homepage. I also had a page dedicated to my resume that listed all of my jobs and accomplishments, and I made a video page that featured all of my television hosting and interview videos. I decided to include a blog on my website, even though many journalists do not have one on their websites. I felt it was important as a student to have a guaranteed place where I could update and post about the events in my life and stories that I have covered. My blog gives me the opportunity to share my stories with an even bigger audience than simply tcu360.com. The last page on my website was for contacting me. On my resume, I listed my e-mail address, but website viewers could contact me directly by leaving a

message through this page. I connected my social media accounts, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, to my page so anyone could follow me through those outlets as well.

Since the creation of my original online portfolio, I have continued to update my website to fit my needs as a journalist. This is one of the main reasons I suggest using a website like Weebly as opposed to paying someone else to manage the site. By updating my personal website and continually posting new content, I have received a steady stream of visitors to my website. I changed the entire design of my website to be more user-friendly and utilized more social media sites, such as YouTube and Instagram, to further build my brand. Like other journalism students graduating in the spring, I hope to have a job secured by graduation, and my online portfolio of my work is one way for potential employers to notice me and contact me. Bierschenk (2012, para. 2) wrote, "Today, prospective employees seeking work in journalism or the media industry must have a professional-looking digital portfolio and presence. To fail on this modern-day requirement of job-hunting and career advancement could mean moving back home with your parents, or finding work in a different field." With journalism increasingly becoming more digital, the online portfolio is a crucial piece for students who are looking for internships and jobs.

When I redesigned my website, I wanted to make it as easy as possible for future employers to see the amount of work I have done in college and how prepared I am for a job upon graduation. I decided to put my resume tape, an essential video for potential television reporters displaying stand-ups and packages,

on my homepage so employers do not have to click on another link to see some of my best work. I also created another tab entitled "Work" that shows links to all of the stories and multimedia stories that I have reported on for TCU 360 and TCU News Now. I uploaded my news packages to YouTube and embedded them under the appropriate stories to make it more convenient for anyone to view my broadcast reporting skills. To keep my website current with my internships and job history, I have continued to update my resume and blog with my latest activities.

RESULTS OF MY BRANDING VENTURE

Throughout the past year of managing my own webpage, I experimented with different ways to attract people to my site. I discovered that blogging was the most efficient way to get more page views because people will continually return if there is new content. When I posted my first blog, I only shared the link on Twitter, not Facebook. I garnered around 100 views. I then posted the link to my next blog only on Facebook, not Twitter. I more than doubled my page views when I used Facebook. The difference in viewers made sense because I had a little more than 1,200 Twitter followers and more than 3,400 Facebook "friends" at the time. On my most recent blog post, I decided to publish the link on both Facebook and Twitter and received a record number of page views at 613 for one single day. Content is king when it comes to having my own website. On a daily basis when I have not posted anything new, I normally get between 20-70 viewers, but my stats jump drastically when I share a new blog post via social media.

PROS AND CONS OF BRANDING YOURSELF

While I am of the opinion that personal branding can only help student journalists and professional journalists build their careers, I was surprised to find a few opposing opinions in my research. Weingarten (2011, para. 6) wrote, “We are slowly redefining our craft so it is no longer a calling but a commodity. From this execrable marketing trend arises the term you ask me about: ‘branding.’” Journalism schools are responding to the financial troubles in the news business by urging students to market themselves like “Cheez Doodles” (Weingarten, 2011). In 2013 Mizera wrote, “When you get hired, your employer will still expect that your writing emulates the editorial voice of its publication, which is often synonymous with its brand, regardless of how you market yourself” (para. 2). Journalists must balance their own authentic personal brand while still respecting the integrity of their employer (Mizera, 2013).

When a person employs the techniques of personal branding, good, quality journalism must come first. Personal branding is not a replacement for sloppy, self-indulged work. This concept is a useful tool to assist journalists in getting noticed by future employers. Mizera (2013, para. 1) wrote, “The easiest way for publications to tap into your personality, expertise and writing voice is by sifting through the blogs, tweets, pins, Facebook posts, writing samples and more that form your brand as a journalist.” Journalists now have this powerful way to manage their online presence, but it is their responsibility to use it correctly.

CONCLUSION

Overall, I have received positive feedback from my online portfolio, and I hope to further build upon the work I have as I progress in my career as a broadcast journalist. Assembling all my college and internship work on one simple website has already proven to be beneficial as I landed a spot as an intern this semester at WFAA-TV out of hundreds of applicants. I began my job search toward the end of April, and because of the work I had done to establish an online presence, I had five job offers within a week without applying for a single job. This alone proves my theory that branding is important and essential for students during college. I accepted a reporter position with WBIR-TV in Knoxville, Tennessee, and the news director, Christy Moreno, said that one of the main reasons she hired me was because she could easily find all my work in one spot on my website through my YouTube videos. She also said my social media presence put me ahead of other candidates because she does not have the time to teach someone how to correctly use their social media accounts for news updates and other posts. As I start my position at WBIR-TV, I will continue to update my work on my online portfolio and further brand myself as a journalist through the outlets I have been using. My job in Knoxville will most likely lead to a second job in a bigger market so it is important that I remain consistent with my branding efforts.

Today's student journalists must not only focus on their work. They need to be their own biggest advocates when it comes to promoting their stories. The job market is competitive, especially in broadcast journalism where "one-man-band" or "multi-media journalist" positions are becoming more common than true reporter

jobs. Starting the branding process early in college, gives students an advantage to place themselves in a better position to land a good job after graduation. Over the last month, I was able to prove my thesis by landing a job in a market that is much larger than most college graduates go to directly after finishing their degree. It is my hope that the tips I have researched throughout this process will be beneficial to other TCU students in their future job endeavors.

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