Marketing professionals' perceptions of personally branded websites

Neil Hair
Christopher Adams

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Today, there is a growing chorus of voices normatively arguing that marketing car
and must do more to bolster individual customer value and societal welfare. Some
marketing scholars have introduced the concept of stakeholder marketing and
proposed that marketing can be an agent of change to enhance societal welfare. Others
have spoken of and undertaken transformative consumer research that see
to benefit consumer welfare and quality of life of consumers around the world.
2010 AMA Summer Marketing Educators' Conference
Conference Program

Conference Sessions 045. – 053.

045. Framing Corporate Social Responsibility within Marketing Strategies: Academic and Practitioner Frameworks for Understanding the CSR Drivers
10:30 to 12:00 pm
Boston Copley: Room 1: Provincetown (4th Floor)
Panelists:
- Linda Ferrell, University of New Mexico
- O.C. Ferrell, University of New Mexico
- Victoria Crittenden, Boston College
- William Crittenden, Northeastern University
- James Sinkula, University of Vermont (5th Floor)
- Christopher Pinney, Boston College
- Minette Drumwright, University of Texas at Austin
Chair:
- Bodo Schlegelmilch, Vienna University of Economics and Business

046. Ethical Marketing Practice
10:30 to 12:00 pm
Boston Copley: Room 2: Salons A/B (4th Floor)
Participants:
- Values and Ethical Perceptions between Entrepreneurs and Managers. Kwon Jung, KDI School of Public Policy & Management
- An Ethical Assessment of Neuroscience in Marketing. Alex Rosen, Villanova University; Ron Hill, Villanova School of Business
- An Empirical Study of the Effectiveness of Charity Advertising Appeals in the Context of Volunteerism. Guangzhil (Terry) Zhao, University of Kansas; Connie Pechmann, UC Irvine
- The Influence of Parental Style on Response to Advertising: An Experiment. John F. Tanner, Baylor University; Mary Anne Raymond, Clemson University
Chair:
- Stevie Watson, Rutgers Business School

047. Person and Celebrity Brands
10:30 to 12:00 pm
Boston Copley: Room 3: Salons C/D (4th Floor)
Participants:
- Celebrity Brands: The Moderating Role of Celebrity Worship on Attitudes and Intentions. Christine Kowalczyk, University of Memphis
- People as Virtual Products: Analyzing Human Exchanges on Craigslist and Gumtree.com. Mark Scott Rosenbaum, Northern Illinois University; Kate Daunt, Cardinal School
- Marketing Professionals' Perceptions of Personally Branded Websites. Neil F Hair, E Philip Saunders College of Business, Rochester Institute of Technology; Chris Adams, Rochester Institute of Technology
- Discussant:
  - Jean-Francois Belisle, McGill University

048. Beyond Market Orientation
10:30 to 12:00 pm
Boston Copley: Room 4: Salons H/I (4th Floor)
Participants:
- Exploring Organizational Ambidexterity in Market Information Processing and Research and Development. Binh Hoa Nguyen, Oklahoma State University; Gary Frankwick, Oklahoma State University
- From Organizations' Strategic Orientations through Innovativeness to Performances. Sohyoun Shin, PhD candidate, Korea University, Seoul, Korea; Sungho Lee, Department of Business Administration, University of Seoul; Seol Chaly, Korea University Business School
- Leveraging The Periphery: An Emerging Capability of the Marketing Organization. Omar Rodriguez, Emory University (GBS)
- The Impact of market driving strategy on firm performance. Goran Vlasic, Bocconi University, University of Zagreb; Gabriele Troilo, Bocconi University; Ajay Kohli, Georgia Institute of Technology
Chair:
- Rebecca J Slatproof, Indiana University

049. Cross-Cultural Determinants of Purchase Intentions
10:30 to 12:00 pm
Boston Copley: Room 5: Salons J/K (4th Floor)
The four presentations in this session address the cross-cultural determinants of consumer purchase intentions. The deal with issues such as country image, attribution of blame, impulsiveness, and counterfeit.
Participants:
“Marketing Professionals’ Perceptions of Personally Branded Websites.”

Neil Hair
Assistant Professor of Marketing
E. Philip Saunders College of Business
Rochester Institute of Technology
108 Lomb Memorial Drive
Rochester, New York 14623
neilhair@hotmail.com
+1 585 475 6322
Fax: +1 585 475 5989

Christopher Adams
E. Philip Saunders College of Business
Rochester Institute of Technology
108 Lomb Memorial Drive
Rochester, New York 14623
“Marketing Professionals’ Perceptions of Personally Branded Websites.”

Abstract:
Marketing professionals are increasingly recognizing the internet as a channel for branding themselves and their expertise in an increasingly competitive landscape. In this context, the study of personal branding in the online arena has become more relevant than ever before. This in-depth study observes the perceptions of 20 marketing professionals to websites set up by experts and consultants attempting to brand themselves online. Using personal construct theory the study identifies ten themes and 35 sub categories. These include the ability of the site to relate personally to the visitor, design and aesthetics, site presence and updatedness and sales pressure amongst others.
1. Personal Branding Defined

Personal Branding has arguably existed longer than conventional branding in and of itself. Only recently has the idea of controlling others’ perceptions of oneself become a methodologically-controlled study and science. Several definitions of Personal Branding include the following: “the firm impression or fixed image that comes to mind when people think of you. A personal brand is the mental picture that people conjure up when your name is mentioned” (Nichols, 2006). “Personal Branding is a revolution in the way we manage our careers or businesses. It’s a way of clarifying and communicating what makes you different and special and using those qualities to separate yourself from your peers so that you can greatly expand your success (Arruda, 2006). “A Personal Brand is a public projection of a person’s personality, skills, or values, not the entire human being” (Montoya, 2005).

Several authors have examined personal branding specifically in an online context. Tom Peters states that “anyone can have a Web site. And today, because anyone can ... anyone does! So how do you know which sites are worth visiting, which sites to bookmark, which sites are worth going to more than once? The answer: branding. The sites you go back to are the sites you trust. They're the sites where the brand name tells you that the visit will be worth your time -- again and again” (Peters, 1997). C.M Russell has also commented in the importance of branding online: “With many candidates now being 'googled' before an interview it's more important than ever to maintain a personal online brand” (Russell, 2006). Halavais (2007) has commented that “the best way of controlling your message is by creating it yourself. Promote your work actively on the Web to help to bolster your online reputation”.

While extensive commentary exists on the importance of personal branding, including in an online context, the majority of information currently available comes from professional sources seeking to promote consulting services or engage in commercial ends. Though this topic has been examined most extensively in the context of building brands for experts, consultants, and job seekers, there appears to be a gap in academic research examining best practices for creating personally-branded websites. This paper aims to explore individuals’ perceptions of personally-branded sites by looking at marketing professionals’ personally branded websites through the eyes of other marketing professionals. By extension, this study seeks to fill the gap in academic research and provide a basis for future research endeavors.

2. Methodology

This study made use of George Kelly’s Personal Construct Theory (1955). Originally designed as a psychological instrument for exploring patients’ perceptions of interpersonal relationships the approach was quickly adopted by marketers looking to explore consumers’ perceptions of market offerings (c.f., Gutman 1982, Grunert and Scherhorn 1990, Gengler and Reynolds 1995, Grunert and Grunert 1995, Botschen, Thelen and Pieters 1999, Baker 2002, Christensen and Olson 2002, Lin 2002, Brunso, Scholderer and Grunert 2004, Huber, Beckman and Herrmann 2004). The methodology is essentially qualitative in nature and teases out consumers perceptions of products or services through a process of comparisons between objects (in this case personally branded websites). Initially participants are asked to select three sites and note, “how two are immediately similar but different from a third?” The answers to this triadic sorting are noted as a pair of constructs which then forms the basis of a rating scale. Personally branded websites as the objects in this study are then rated against the two construct poles and the process resumes with a new triadic sort. The process is repeated until saturation is achieved or fatigue on the part of the respondent. Once this is achieved the results are collated and coded.
drawing out patterns of similarity and difference. One of the benefits of this approach is its exploratory nature where each individual essentially creates their own model of differentiating features.

A total of 20 respondents participated in interviews each lasting approximately 1 hour. All participants were from the United States except for 2 from the United Kingdom. 16 of the respondents were male, and 4 were female. 15 of the respondents were members of marketing and business faculty, and 5 were directors and executives in marketing-intensive professional positions. All faculty members interviewed were either actively consulting or researching, or had entered academia after extensive industry experience. Respondents specialized primarily in marketing, though other areas of respondent expertise represented included institutional development, management, international business, public relations, and print media. The sites used in the study were:


3. Findings

This study examines personally branded websites in the context of ten key theme areas comprised of thirty-five subcategories (see Table 1). The theme areas include site applicability to visitors, career usefulness, site design and aesthetics, conclusions about the proprietor of the site, site “liveliness” and presence, conclusions relating to the topic of the site, challenges to the visitor during the site visit, visitor comfort and site sales pressure, credibility of the site and its proprietor, and stimulation of visitor interest. Due to their size and scope, credibility, conclusions about the proprietor of the site, and challenges to the visitor during the site visit are not included in this paper. They will, however, be released in follow-up research.
During the study, approximately 1,858 chains were examined. The theme with the most robust data and greatest number of observations by respondents was "Site Design and Aesthetics," which included 331 chains or about 18% of all observations. "Visitor perception of the site’s
credibility” was the second largest theme, at 308 chains or about 16.5% of all observations. The third largest was “challenges to the visitor during the site visit”, at 297 chains or about 16% of observations. For the largest theme, Site Design and Aesthetics, respondents observed 248 attributes, 499 consequences, and 83 values. These were condensed based on qualitative similarities into 20 attributes, 20 consequences, and 8 values. Given the cutoff level of 4, the HVM included 3 attributes, 13 consequences, and 3 values.

The primary values reported by participants were “enjoyment” or “dislike.” The most prevalent attribute was usage of color on the site, and the most prevalent consequence was level of attractiveness or draw to the visitor.

3.1 Applicability to Visitor

This theme looked at how the participant came to the conclusion of if or how the personally-branded website applied to him or her. Findings suggest it took respondents only several seconds to judge whether or not the site was relevant based on participant needs, background, and net usage patterns. Based on this, the site visitor would also quickly judge the value of investing time and energy in navigating the site. If it required little, the site’s appeal tended to increase dramatically. The reverse is true of a high time and energy requirement. The visitor would spend more time on the site, and would be more likely to return to it, if it seemed worth the time and energy to browse it. This value judgment was determined largely by the number of questions and the amount of confusion the participants had while looking at the site, as well as to what degree the information on the site could be applied to the participant’s situation.

Figure 1: Applicability to the Visitor

If the site’s visitors were left with questions or confusion, they reported not finding what they were looking for. This, in turn, impacted the quality of the information the visitor was able to derive from the site and caused the visitor to make conclusions about the person or firm featured on the site. These conclusions largely determined whether or not the visitors believed the site
applied to them. If, after having gone through this chain of thought, the site did not apply to the visitor, participants reported feeling resentful toward the site. Participants also made this determination of applicability largely from whom they believed the site was targeting. In the end, the degree to which the site’s visitors enjoyed the site was determined by its theme or focus. Participants made conclusions about the site’s theme or focus based on who they believed the site was targeting, and the conclusions they had made about the proprietor.

3.2 Career Usefulness

This theme tracked the participants’ chains of thought in determining how useful the website and its proprietor would be in advancing the participants’ career objectives. In this area, site visitors reported interest in several items: achieving a career-related goal, determining the acceptability of the site and its proprietor, and ultimately, advancing to a position in life which might allow participants to enjoy it more. While visiting the proprietor’s site, participants sought opportunities to compare the proprietor’s ideas to the ideas of others in the proprietor’s field (helping participants to evaluate the legitimacy of claims made by the proprietor).

**Figure 2: Career Usefulness**

Because participants were briefed with the task of hiring the site proprietor as an expert or consultant for the participant’s organization, judgments about the proprietor’s hireability, as well as how easily participants could compare the proprietor’s ideas to others’ ideas, were reported as the two factors with the largest impact on achievement of this goal. Participants also sought exposure to new ideas, with the goal of learning new information and techniques.

The data suggest that site visitors also sought to be provided with a tool or resource which could be utilized in a professional capacity, and that the proprietor’s ability to provide this largely determined how engaged in the site the participant would be. Visitors sought demonstrations of how different practices and techniques worked out for the proprietor, with the end goal of participants being better able to assist their clients and students. Whether for reasons of money or personal satisfaction, the promise of being better able serve one’s constituents directly related to how much participants enjoyed the site. A relationship of significant strength...
also existed between the proprietor’s ability to demonstrate professional creativity, and how appealing the site was to participants.

3.3 Design and Aesthetics

The design and aesthetics of the personally-branded websites, while sometimes considered secondary in importance to the actual content or messages of the sites, constituted the largest theme of attributes observed by participants. With more than any other theme, participants noticed attributes related to how the sites were designed and laid out. Participants’ main objective in doing so was to discern the site’s message or call to action. How well-designed the site was determined how easily the participant could discern the site’s message, and also impacted participants’ judgment of the proprietor’s commitment to advancing it. If participants believed the proprietor did not put much effort or time into the design of the site, they developed the impression that the proprietor was not committed to his or her own success. As a result, the proprietor’s credibility and professionalism decreased markedly in the eyes of participants. Overwhelmingly, the usage of color on the site impacted participants’ judgment within this theme the most. This, along with the simplicity or cleanliness of the page, and its balance of both visual and textual content, affect the visitor’s site experience. Simplicity and cleanliness were often of great importance to participants, because they reported cluttered sites as very difficult to read. It put participants through unnecessary strain and delay. The color of the text and the color of the background upon which it appeared also impacted the site’s readability. The site’s colors strongly influenced participants because they set the tone or mood of the site, caused emotional reactions among viewers (particularly various shades of red), and helped draw attention to important site elements. These elements either helped the participant discern what the site’s message or call to action was, or alternatively overwhelmed the participant.

Figure 3: Design and Aesthetics
3.4 Sales Pressure and Visitor Comfort

Of all the themes within this study, Sales Pressure and Visitor Comfort may be the most revealing for those proprietors using their sites to sell products or services. A flaw of personally-branded websites often cited by participants was that they do little or nothing to build the proprietor's brand. The proprietor has made the error of assuming that visitors to their site already know who they are, and thus make little effort to introduce themselves to site visitors. In fact, many participants expressed the opinion that the sites seemed designed solely for selling the proprietor's book.

Figure 4: Sales Pressure and Visitor Comfort
Upon accessing the site, visitors reported being “assailed with flashing ‘buy now!’ buttons” or large bolded words “screaming” at them to make a purchase or book the proprietor for a speaking engagement. This led to both a perception of proprietor arrogance and a fundamental discomfort for participants, because they were being asked to take an action with little or no information to on which to base their decisions.

Participants often observed proprietors claiming to be experts at online personal branding, yet hypocritically branding themselves poorly on their own sites. Participants did, however, appreciate site attributes that allowed for free flow of information. For example, participants commented that any attempt to sell a book should be preceded by information or reviews about it from reputable, unbiased sources (not sources trying to sell it, like Amazon Books). Sites discussing things other than the proprietor’s book significantly lowered the impression that the proprietor only sought site visitors in order to increase book sales. A more purposeful goal for the site, such as it reputedly branding its proprietor, took the sales pressure participants and made the site more acceptable. More conservative sites tended to fare better, because they were less likely to offend.

3.5 Site Presence and Updatedness

This theme examined how “alive” the personally-branded sites were, and how frequently participants believed they were changed or updated. Participants reported that a site that changed too little became boring quickly, while a site that changed too often didn’t give participants time to keep up with it. Consistency in the intervals of site updates helped strike a balance here, because predictability seemed to strongly aid site visitors. “Liveliness” applies not only to how frequently the site was updated, but to how much change occurred on the site itself in terms of movement and sound.
Site attributes linked to an overabundance of movement or animation often resulted in the consequence of overwhelming participants’ senses. For example, sound was reported to be best used in a limited and “tasteful” manner. Attributes like swishing sounds for pull-down menus and seemingly irrelevant streaming videos, among other unnecessary uses of technology, were frequently viewed by participants as “tacky.” Anything which seemingly obstructed the participant from discerning the site’s core message or call to action was deemed by site visitors as an overuse of technology. Updates to the site posted by other site visitors were reported to be just as influential as those posted by the proprietor. The perception of a large community of users accessing the site strongly impacted the perception of how “alive” the site was. Site updates generally served to tell participants how up-to-date the sites’ proprietors were, and by extension, visitors perceived that interaction with an up-to-date proprietor or consultant would make the visitors themselves more professionally current. Sites providing a way to contact the proprietor with non-net based means, like a phone number or physical address, raised the likelihood that participants would contact him or her.

3.6 Stimulating Visitor Interest

This theme examined the attributes of sites which attracted, retained, and drew visitors back to them. Because this study examined sites in the context of personal branding, it specifically looked at the attributes which called attention to the proprietor’s brand. Participants commented that three central things developed their interest in the proprietor the site discussed: Photographs of the person, the person discussing personal branding or making a pitch related to it, and visual imagery or photos of things besides the proprietor. Photos of the proprietor had the alternate effect of conveying the general emotion of the site.
The proprietor’s discussion or pitch helped participants conclude who usually visits the site. Photos or visual imagery not related to the proprietor had the most impact on how engaged participants were, because they could serve the dual purpose of showing an interest area of the proprietor or simply showing a visually appealing scene.

Clarity of the site’s central message assisted by the presence of a central or dominant site element, helped participants form associations with or relate to other site attributes. This, in turn, helped them discern the site’s central message and purpose. The degree to which the participant agreed with this message or purpose impacted how much the participant enjoyed the website. The primary sources of boredom or lack of engagement in the site were typically articles or topic headlines which either confused or failed to interest participants. The four primary things influencing the visitor’s propensity to remain on or return to the site were the site’s initial ability to attract attention, the degree to which the participant was engaged by that attraction, few site elements boring the visitor, and participants’ perception of whether or not they were included in the site’s target audience. Self-explanatory titles tended to be the most engaging for site visitors.

3.7 Topic of Site
This final theme pertains to participants’ chains of thought in discerning a site’s central topic, message, or purpose. Because creativity and originality are often highly valued by marketing professionals, those branding themselves around such ideas showed a high potential to overcomplicate their messages. As a result, participants had difficulty in following and understanding the messages of site proprietors. For example, one site proprietor, the CEO of a major advertising and ideas company, used his website to discuss an advertising term he liked to
use. Visitors to the site who didn’t understand what the word meant interpreted it to mean everything from an act of people biting each other to a strong emotional connection to a brand name.

Figure 7: Topic of Site

Participants’ chains of thought traced the following general pattern: Various site elements conforming to an overarching site theme, the proprietor’s name being in or near a site’s title, posts of the proprietor’s written works or thoughts, and sales pitches, tag lines, and hooks all helped participants evaluate a site’s central topic or message. Participants’ engagement in a site depended largely on how easily they could interpret what its topic or message was, as well as how pertinent that topic or message was to them (relating to the “applicability to visitor” theme). The degree of clarity or confusion about a site’s message, along with how well participants understood the relationship between and relevance of all attributes of a site, determined how effectively the site presented its message. Site messages were much clearer if participants had little confusion as to where on the site to find what they were looking for. If a site presented these attributes in a logical manner, and provided a reason for participants to care about its message, the participants appeared much more willing to spend time on the site.

4. Managerial Implications

Though this study focuses specifically on the personally-branded websites of consultants, experts, and marketers, its findings are applicable to anyone engaging in activity on the internet above and beyond simply digesting content. This includes posting anything online which can be associated with the person posting it. Its findings are relevant to those maintaining personal
websites, profiles on social networking sites, blogs, online journals, photo albums, and instant messaging profiles, among other things. However, its purpose is to serve as a best practices guide for those making a concerted effort to brand themselves around their expertise, interests, or work using a website. It can be readily applied to the sites of those currently using websites to brand themselves.

It is important to note that the twenty individuals interviewed for this study are themselves marketing experts from both academia and industry, and include individuals from both the United States and United Kingdom. Many of the respondents maintain online presences themselves, including personal websites and blogs. While the respondents were sharing their insights during the interview process, many expressed that they were themselves gaining insight from their own responses to others’ websites. Several stated the changes they would make to their own sites based on things they enjoyed or disliked, lending credence to how readily these findings may be put to use.

Whilst it may be tempting to dismiss some of the findings as intuitive or well known in prior studies of effective website design, what makes this research unique is its focus on the personal branding context. The ideal end result is a site experience enjoyable to both a site’s proprietor and visitors to it. Future research in this area will examine the themes of site credibility, challenges to visitors, and conclusions about site proprietors in greater depth. This research may also serve as a base for comparing how individuals from different backgrounds (i.e. academia vs. industry, male vs. female, and individuals of different ages) react differently to sites which take different approaches to personal branding. In addition, more research may be conducted aimed at the integration of these website best practices with other online tools, such as email and instant messaging.
References


