

Career Compass No. 23: Building Your Personal Brand

by Dr. Frank Benest

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest offers seven steps to building your own brand to promote your value as an employee.

I recently attended a workshop for emerging leaders. In a time of great turmoil in local government, especially fiscal crisis, the speaker emphasized the need to promote your value, and to take it a step further and develop a "personal brand" that will protect you in times of budget cutbacks. Developing a brand sounds like marketing a product. How can you create a brand that promotes your value?



"Here it is... Me, Inc."

The speaker makes sense. In disruptive times, all positions are vulnerable. You need to go beyond your title and position in the organization, assert your value, and create a distinctive identity or brand. A personal brand is based on what is unique or distinctive about you. It is about your extraordinary knowledge, skills, aptitudes, and capabilities. A brand is often tied to your passion.

THE BENEFITS OF A POWERFUL BRAND

If you are successful in developing a distinctive personal brand, it will come to everyone's mind when they think of you. A brand can

- Protect you when top management needs to eliminate positions and lower headcount.
- Lead to attractive assignments and projects.
- Shape the perceptions of others so they see you in terms of your strengths and assets as opposed to your weaknesses or deficiencies.
- Enhance your "promotability" inside the organization or lead to new opportunities in another organization.

Since a brand is often related to a passion or something unique that you offer, further developing or enhancing your brand is not a burden. It is often fun.

We operate in a “project world”—most important work is done in teams that cut across division or department boundaries. In fact, a career is increasingly a portfolio of important projects. Therefore, a powerful brand will help you secure the best project work. Consider these typical conversations and assignment decisions:

- “Mary is smart and an agile learner. She will solve this perplexing problem. Let’s assign her the challenge.”
- “Jose is a doer and gets things done. I want him on my team.”
- “Joanne knows how to engage neighborhood and community groups. Let’s appoint her to lead the project.”

STEPS FOR CONSTRUCTING A BRAND

Step #1—Inventory your unique skills, knowledge, and capabilities.

Among all the other hard-working and smart people in your organization or profession, what makes you special? Self-reflection is important as you begin to define your uniqueness. Ask yourself: “Who is the real me?” (See Career Compass column #22—“Overcoming Your Blind Spots.”)

Earlier in my career, I identified one of my strengths as “community organizing.” As a young man, I had worked in Mexico City organizing cooperatives and learned as an early-career professional how to apply these community organizing skills to local government work.

Step #2—Get some feedback in identifying your brand.

Just like corporations seek out customers to identify their unique value proposition, you too need to get feedback on what you uniquely offer. Consequently, you can schedule a few coffees with colleagues, managers, program partners, and professional associates (including coaches) in order to informally discuss how they perceive the distinct value that you provide.

Your brand must be “true.” It cannot be wishful thinking. You must ask yourself: “Is my desired brand the real me? Can I live up to it?”

Step #3—Focus on a few high- or unique-value areas.

Each of us have several high-value knowledge, skill or capability areas. However, to define a personal brand, you need to select one or two areas to promote. You cannot try to be known for everything to everyone.

During my career as a city manager, I consciously promoted my knowledge and expertise in creative budget strategies as well citizen participation. Now in my “encore” phase, I have focused on facilitating leadership development.

Step #4—Write a brand statement.

Based on your analysis, self-reflection and feedback from others, you can now write a brand statement. The statement can be in the form of “I want to be known for _____ (something) so that I can _____ (verb plus results).” For instance, my brand statement could read: “I want to be known for my training and coaching skills so I can help develop the next generation of local government managers.”

Your brand statement can help you decide where to invest your time and energy. While you may be assigned certain mandatory activities, you do have some leeway in other discretionary areas. The brand statement can help you select those projects or other activities that allow you to build and leverage your brand. Conversely, you need to jettison or otherwise delegate where possible tasks that sap your energy and do not reinforce your brand identity.

Step #5—Identify “proof points” to validate or demonstrate your brand.

To use in promoting your brand, you should identify specific experiences that support the validity of your brand. For example, if you are an environmental sustainability expert, you must identify

several “proof points” or specific experiences or accomplishments that demonstrate your expertise. Telling a story that includes a proof point is an excellent way to validate your brand. Stories are the most powerful way to communicate.

Step #6—Look for ways to promote and leverage your brand.

You have a multitude of ways to promote and leverage your personal brand:

- Volunteer for a project team that allows you to add value through a particular skill, expertise or knowledge.
- Step up and write the board report or press release on the project so you get associated with the successful effort.
- Provide a presentation at a staff meeting, management team session, or conference on a particular project.
- Write an article for the employee, professional association or community newsletter on your particular area of expertise.
- Teach a class for your organization or for a professional association showcasing a knowledge area.
- Search for an award for your team accomplishments, nominate the team, write the application, and let others know that your team is worthy of the recognition.
- Contribute to an in-house wiki or blog or otherwise use social media to make a contribution.

Any time you develop “content” that is related to your distinctive value area (i.e., an article, presentation, mini-guide) you are promoting your brand. Anything that can be forwarded or re-posted is especially valuable in establishing or reinforcing a brand. This Career Compass article helps to reinforce my brand. (By the way, please forward it to a friend or colleague.)

Brands are created and promoted every day in small ways. Let’s say that your brand involves facilitation skills. If your team is having a difficult time focusing on a new direction, you can offer to facilitate and lead a strategic direction discussion that could positively shape their perceptions of you and the perceptions of others.

As you promote your brand, remember to give back to others and be generous with your time. If you give a lot, you get a lot.

Step #7—Protect your brand.

A brand can be easily damaged. Just like AOL and Yahoo lost their brand strength, your brand, too, can lose its luster. If your project group fails to deliver results and you are known for creating positive outcomes, you must quickly find another opportunity to create a success and thus reinforce your brand.

You do not want to weaken your brand over time. In this time of accelerating change, you need to continuously learn, practice your skills, and “stretch” in even more challenging situations so you can maintain your unique value proposition.

REBRANDING

Throughout my career, my personal brand has changed. You, too, may wish to be known for other things or capabilities. Consequently, you can begin the rebranding process now by taking a class, doing research and reading, tackling a new challenge, and stretching and growing in new assignments. Once you are working on a new capacity or knowledge area, you can start to promote this new emerging brand.

CHIEF BRANDING OFFICER

You are your own “chief branding officer.” So, get started! What is your personal brand? How can you enhance it?



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff, and appears in ICMA's [JOB newsletter](#) and online. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.