

A BRAND CALLED ME: ENABLING STUDENTS' PERSONAL BRAND PROMISE AND SELF-MARKETING PLAN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Undergraduate marketing students devote limited time leveraging their classroom knowledge to prospect, market and land entry-level career jobs post graduation. Most marketing professors do not address this linkage through assignments or pedagogy, but some have by requiring students to craft a self-marketing plan. Expanding upon prior experiential learning, this paper provides a way to integrate both a self-marketing/sales plan and development of each student's personal brand and personal brand promise in a sales and sales management class.

Introduction

The concept of personal branding was invented by Tom Peters in 1997 through his article, "A Brand Called You" in *FastCompany* (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011) as it popularized the idea that everyone is responsible for and has the power to establish a personal brand as a way to differentiate within the job market (Peters, 1997). Since then personal branding has emerged as a popular topic through articles and books (Shephard, 2005) found within self-improvement and business categories. Inclusion of personal branding in academic marketing literature, however, is small by comparison when considering not only empirical research, but curricula and textbook inclusion as well (Shepherd, 2005). Of the existing marketing pedagogy examples, personal branding integrated into an undergraduate sales class is missing from academic literature. This is true despite the fact that certain personality traits often lead to personal selling success (Labrecque, et al, 2011), professional sales publications advocate having a strong, personal brand (Bates, 2006), and students are admonished that creating value in the buyer-seller relationship is the most important concept of relationship selling (Johnson & Marshall, 2010).

This paper addresses a perceived need and seeks to answer: 1) How can marketing professors effectively integrate purposeful development of each student's personal brand promise into an undergraduate Sales & Sales Management class?; 2) What tools and strategies would enable students to leverage a personal branding/sales plan assignment to identify and align their personal brand with the right employer brands and job opportunities?; and 3) Can the

personal branding learning outcomes provide any measurable impact on students' abilities to successfully align their personal brands with like branded employers by becoming an employee?

Pedagogy Design

Rather than waiting till the last third of the semester to focus on the self-marketing/sales plan I purposefully integrated four small assignments. Through these exercises I provided feedback, gained individual student insights about direction, but most importantly, these assignments gave vital reflections students later integrated in their final plan. As other marketing professors have done, I approached the final deliverable from a marketing plan orientation (Kramer, 1988; Haynes & Helms, 1991; McCorkle, et al., 2002; Smith, 2004), but gave it a journalistic framework by employing six major sections: Who, what, when, where, why and how. When students received this handout – week 10 of a 14-week semester — they learned how to draw from their prior four assignments yet needed additional reflection and content as the final plan required identification of 25 organizations/jobs which aligned with their personal brand.

Since marketing and sales textbooks do not include a way to create one's personal brand (Shepherd, 2005; Deeter-Schmetz & Kennedy, 2011) I added a supplementary text. Dedicating one class to its introduction at the beginning of week 10, I walked thorough this concept, having them work on it individually in class and then in their sales teams. One required element of their final plan was to create their initial personal brand promise. While the supplemental text provides good examples, I shared my personal mission statement and personal brand promise. Making the link between what you say and how it can be understood, I provided the top half of my prior corporate resume and asked students to connect the dots between the three elements identified in the personal brand book: Roles, standards and styles (McNally & Speak, 2011).

The last week of this sales class is dedicated to students orally presenting, at their choice, one of three topics through a timed, 3 minute minimum and 5 minute maximum, presentation: 1) *Hire me*, a specific job the student planned to apply for; 2) *How I got my job*, actually landing a job/internship as at least one student each semester had done so; or 3) *A brand called me*, explain their personal brand platform. As before, I provided a personal example by delivering my last corporate marketing “hire me” oral presentation for my students.

Discussion & Conclusion

Having taught this class six times in six years, averaging 20 students who were primarily seniors, I have learned and applied insights my students taught me by tweaking the assignment. As noted previously, the three-fold goals I had in developing this sales class included providing a platform to identify, develop and apply their personal brand promise to their job search efforts.

It is difficult to quantitatively measure the impact and/or success of this approach to teaching students how to leverage their marketing knowledge to create and market their own personal brand. There are, however, three qualitative elements which suggest a positive outcome is possible, based upon unsolicited student comments: 1) Priceless submission comments; 2) Gratifying post class/graduation email notes and 3) Three former sales students, now graduates, have returned as guest speakers to share their stories of how they used their *A Brand Called Me* to land their sales jobs with my current sales students.

The feedback from former students provided above, while not a statistically valid or reliable study, can be considered a qualitative success. Perhaps the feedback given by my students is enough to suggest to other marketing professors that integrating *A Brand Called Me* assignment into an undergraduate sales class can reap priceless personal rewards – for both student and professor.