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Shepherd, Ifan D. H. (2005) From cattle and coke to Charlie: meeting the challenge of self marketing and personal branding. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 21 (5-6). pp. 589-606.
ISSN 1472-1376

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From Cattle and Coke to Charlie: Meeting the challenge of self marketing and personal branding ¹

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Abstract

Since the late 1990s, self marketing and personal branding have become increasingly popular as subjects of self-improvement books, Web sites and consultancy services, especially in the USA. To date, little of this interest appears to have permeated the discipline of marketing, either in terms of formal research, textbook contents or academic curricula. This paper examines the theoretical basis of self marketing and personal branding, identifies some of the conceptual, practical and ethical problems it poses for the discipline, and points to some of the challenges facing higher education in attempting to create a curricular framework within which marketing professionals can learn how to market and brand themselves effectively.

Keywords: Self marketing, personal branding, broadening marketing, marketing theory.

1.0 Introduction

During the past decade, a minor publishing and personal development industry has developed, especially in the USA [2], that encourages and advises individuals how to market and brand themselves. This industry is based on the obvious logic of applying to people the same marketing and branding principles originally developed for products and corporations; what Walker (2000) refers to as the “life-as-company philosophy”. Curiously, however, self marketing and personal branding do not figure very largely – if at all – in the academic marketing literature. Much of the discussion is confined to what is in some ways a ‘grey’ literature, much of it written on the periphery of academic marketing. Moreover, despite the interest taken by university careers advisers in graduate job search, both subjects appear to be largely absent from marketing curricula in higher education. The central aim of this paper is therefore to explore how marketing might embrace these popular and lucrative subjects, and provide a suitable theoretical framework for them within the discipline. It is argued that this is likely to be problematic, because self marketing and personal branding are not without their conceptual and practical difficulties.

Self marketing consists of those varied activities undertaken by individuals to make themselves known in the marketplace, usually (though not exclusively) for the purpose of obtaining gainful employment. Self marketing has been practised for decades by movie, sports and pop stars, and has been taken up by an increasing number of leaders in business and politics. In an academic context, self marketing is most clearly seen in the support provided by career specialists in educational institutions for graduates looking for a job or planning a career, as it is in the activities of numerous employment agencies. More recently it has also been touted as a ‘must do’ activity by an increasing number of business pundits and self-help gurus. Self marketing, in various guises, is now a rapidly growing business in its own right, and the range of advice now publicly available is serving to democratise the process; what was once a service provided by others is now an activity one is encouraged to undertake for oneself. A similar process is occurring with the more arcane activity of personal branding.

Personal branding was virtually invented in 1997 by Tom Peters' *FastCompany* article, in which he issued the provocative rallying cry: "We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You" (Peters 1997, p.83). Since then, there has been a steady flow of popular business self-improvement books on the subject (e.g. Andrusia & Haskins 2000; Graham 2001; McNally & Speak 2002; Montoya & Vandehey 2003; Peters 1999; Roffer 2002; Spillane 2000), and numerous Web sites, self-help courses and consultancies. The key premise of personal branding is that everyone has a personal brand, or what Peters (1999) calls 'a sign of distinction'. A major selling proposition is the fear that if individuals don't manage their own brand, then someone else will manage it for them: "If you don't brand yourself, others will", writes Kaputa (2003), who continues: "you're giving the power to other people to brand you if you don't do it yourself". Personal branding is also sold as a differentiator in an increasingly crowded marketplace: "Nurturing your brand ... will ensure that you get out in front of the pack" (Arruda 2005).

According to most advocates, the personal branding process mirrors the product or corporate branding process, and should follow three broad stages, what Arruda (2005) summarises rather pithily as: "extract, express and exude". First, the individual is encouraged to look inside themselves to discover their key identifying attributes: "your unique promise of value" (Ibid). They then construct a compelling 'personal brand statement' around this attribute set. Finally, they create a strategy for making the brand visible to the outside world. Roffler (2002) summarises the process in these terms: "Branding for people is about finding your 'big idea', the core you, and putting it out in the universe to fulfil itself."

One indication of the current free-for-all surrounding both these activities is a lack of consistent terminology. While most published sources refer to 'self marketing', Kotler *et al.* (2005) refer, in a single paragraph on the subject (p.543), to the marketing of individuals as 'person marketing', and use 'self marketing' to refer rather curiously to the recent trend whereby consumers determine for themselves the products and brands they buy (pp.395-7). The phrase 'self marketing' will be used here rather than 'personal marketing', because the latter has connotations of personal selling, which has its own distinct and well-established meaning, and because 'personal marketing' is sometimes used to include the marketing of individuals by others. Although self marketing may sometimes involve the use of professional publicists (as in Kotler *et al.* 2005), especially in the case of celebrities and politicians who help to sustain an extensive public relations industry, it is used in the context of this paper to describe individuals taking charge of marketing themselves. In contrast, the phrase 'personal branding' is now fairly well established, and more consistently used, and will be adopted throughout this paper, though a few pundits (e.g. Kaputa 2003) refer to 'self branding'.

2.0 The challenges of self marketing and personal branding

Self marketing and personal branding present at least two significant challenges to marketers, one theoretical, the other practical. The theoretical challenge concerns the continuing debate initiated by Kotler and Levy (1969) on broadening the scope of marketing. In particular, this paper questions whether a formal marketing blanket can be placed very easily around the shoulders of self marketing and personal branding, or whether there are aspects that distance them from the basic principles of marketing as a discipline. The practical challenge is to design curricula that incorporate these activities in ways that support the effective development of marketing professionals. In order to provide a foundation for such curricula, a companion paper (Shepherd 2005) reports the findings of a study that attempts to document how young marketing professionals approach self-marketing and personal branding.

To the extent that marketing is now routinely used in a variety of unconventional contexts, the debate over the broadening of marketing may be considered to be largely over. Those who resisted the extension of marketing into such diverse fields as religion (Barna, 1990, Shawckuk *et al.*, 1992, Cutler 1991, Shepherd 2004), politics (Newman 1992, Wring 1999, Lees-Marshment 2001), education (Kotler & Fox 1985), health (Kotler & Clarke 1987) and places (Kotler *et al.* 1993, Smyth 1994, Allan *et al.* 2005) appear to have lost, and the marketers appear to have won across a wide range of enterprises (Kotler 1982). Nevertheless, attempts to adopt both the marketing principle and marketing techniques in non-conventional settings is still the subject of considerable resistance and debate. Shepherd (2004), for example, argues that there are considerable conceptual and practical difficulties in applying the marketing principle in both religious and political marketing, and that the use of certain marketing techniques in these arenas may be resisted on doctrinal and ideological grounds.

Self marketing and personal branding represent one of the last frontiers at which marketing is poised before a formal colonisation takes place. The self marketing territory is currently occupied by a mix of self-help gurus, job recruitment specialists and career advisors, and practical approaches and job-related advice predominate. There is little evidence of the development or promulgation of an over-arching conceptual framework for self marketing, rooted in the discipline of marketing, and few examples of a strategic mindset developed from basic marketing principles. By contrast, advocates of personal branding have more obviously attempted to transfer the principles and practices of branding from products to individuals in a more coherent fashion. In both self marketing and personal branding, intuitive and informal approaches often predominate, and professional advice is often hype-ridden and rooted in uncorroborated case-study experience. Absorption of these activities into mainstream marketing, where current practices can be suitably theorised and evaluated, is therefore long overdue. However, an extension of marketing from the conventional realm of products to individuals is problematic on several grounds, and a re-theorisation may not be as straightforward as advocates might believe. These problems are outlined in section 5.

3.0 Aims and methodology

The literature of marketing is written by members of informal tribes. One of these tribes consists of academic marketers, who provide testable and/or tested propositions about marketing that are typically rooted in prior theory (or at least in ideas contained in the literature of the subject) or that emerge from observation of marketing activities and consumer responses. Approaches taken by members of the academic tribe range from the highly theoretical to the highly empirical, with the former often involving thought experiments, and the latter frequently involving survey-based studies. Although there are internal differences among the views of members of the academic tribe, and members often use (sometimes widely) differing strategies and methodologies in pursuit of their craft, they tend to be united in attempting to construct a body of principles that drives the discipline and practice of marketing forward in a manner that is largely dictated by evidence and logic. Members of this tribe are largely silent on the subject of self marketing and personal branding.

A second tribe, the naïve marketers, consists of practitioners who practice what other tribes would recognise as marketing, but perhaps of an intuitive and largely self-taught kind. These include (some) politicians, evangelists, sundry publicists of good causes and media savvy celebrities. Few members of this tribe record their 'marketing' techniques in a structured form, though something of their method may be gleaned from autobiographies, exhortational

literature or accounts published by a celebrity hungry media. Members of the naïve marketer tribe may be used as role models for how to market and brand oneself as an individual, though few have committed their thoughts on the subject to writing in a cogent fashion. A third tribe consists of members of the ‘self help’ and ‘personal development’ communities, which includes a diverse set of individuals, businesses and organisations whose aim is to assist individuals in realising their potential. This tribe also includes members of the education and training sectors, and also those involved in helping people find a job or plan a career. Currently, this tribe is responsible for a major publishing industry on self marketing that dates back at least to the seminal publication of Normal Vincent Peale, *‘The Power of Positive Thinking’*, which first appeared in 1952, though it is not a significant contributor to the idea of personal branding.

A fourth tribe consists of the (sometimes self-styled) gurus, whose books grace the bookshops of airport departure terminals, and frequently include a magic number (‘Three ways to...’, ‘Five principles of...’, or ‘Ten things you should...’). The gurus are often marketing practitioners who aspire to package their ideas and/or experience into a saleable product. Much of what they write is laced with the language of marketing, but it is frequently case-based, anecdotal and often highly generalised, usually written to appeal to a business audience, and typically aimed at showing members of that audience how to achieve (greater) business success. During the past decade, the guru tribe has been responsible for promoting the idea of self marketing, and especially the concept of personal branding, and has been chosen as the main focus of the current study.

This paper subjects the statements made by members of the guru tribe on self marketing and personal branding to critical scrutiny. This analysis has two broad aims. The first aim is to determine the extent to which these statements provide a full and fair representation of marketing and branding in the context of the individual. The second aim is to determine the main conceptual principles that underpin self marketing and personal branding, and the existence of any inconsistencies and conflicts (logical or otherwise) in the principles proposed by tribal members. The analysis proceeds by identifying and extracting the main ideas from the grey literature mentioned above, mainly by means of critical statement analysis. Similar in many ways to critical incident analysis (Refs.), critical statement analysis is based on the principle that in a newly emerging field of study, the core ideas can often be determined from the key statements of their initiators and advocates. The research strategy adopted here represents a form of interpretive analysis, in which principles and constructs are elicited from the words of advocates and pundits rather from the practices of those who attempt to market and brand themselves [3]. (This is referred to by Blaikie (2004) as the abductive research strategy, in contrast to the inductive, deductive and retroductive strategies.)

A strong analogy may be drawn between the norm-building efforts of authors who attempt to construct a world view of personal branding, and the curriculum-building activities of academics engaged in constructing a learning experience for students. In the latter case, although the resulting curriculum is likely to reflect the subject and teaching strengths of the collective engaged in designing and delivering the curriculum, it is also likely to reflect certain conventional views as to the nature of a curriculum in a particular subject domain, and current thought on the best form of pedagogy for delivering that curriculum. In the context of higher education in the UK, curriculum design is usually required to make explicit reference to established ‘reference points’ (e.g. subject benchmarks, professional body specifications, governmental policy statements). Thus, while individual curricula within a given subject domain may be unique, all will tend to address common terms of reference.

The construction of a coherent view of personal branding has similar characteristics. Each author will attempt to carve out a particular view that permits them to ‘sell’ their particular expression of self marketing or personal branding in written form (e.g. a book or Web site) or as a paid-for service (e.g. consulting, training), and each author will emphasise concepts, issues and practices which they believe to be of greatest significance. However, the starting point in most views of personal branding will tend to be the same key idea: that personal branding is the ‘natural’ and ‘obvious’ result of extending the idea of branding from its normal commercial realm, which involves mainly products and services, to the personal realm, where it involves individual people. In the construction of their personal frameworks, most authors will also touch base with a selection of the concepts of mainstream branding. In other words, there is no tabula rasa or clean slate on which an entirely new mindset, theory, value system or norm is being written. Rather, there is a reference set of concepts and principles in a parallel domain that may be selectively mined in order to construct a proposed set of principles in a new domain. For this reason, the particular form of interpretive analysis undertaken in this paper is referred to as ‘referent analysis’, because it seeks to identify the key reference points used by proponents of self marketing and personal branding in seeking to convince readers of their case.

4.0 Conceptual and practical problems

This section discusses a selection of problems and issues which deserve to be debated by academic marketers. The list of problems presented does not claim to be exhaustive, nor are the problems ordered in terms of their significance or difficulty.

4.1 Honouring the marketing principle

It is generally accepted in contemporary marketing that success derives from the adoption of a consumer focused approach, and such an approach has gradually superseded both the product and sales orientation that were more common in recent years, at least in the eyes of theoretical marketers. The growth in mass customisation illustrates the way in which an increasing number of firms are manufacturing products and services to meet consumer needs, often on a one-to-one basis (Tseng & Piller, 2003). Some non-conventional areas of marketing also appear to be adopting this approach. In political marketing, for example, although there are still some who argue that over-emphasis on meeting consumer needs leads to a weakening of fundamental political ideologies, recent practice in many countries shows clear signs that politics has moved beyond both the product and sales marketing approaches (Lees-Marshment 2001). The challenge for those aspiring to market and brand themselves would therefore appear to be to discover how to offer themselves as a product that is shaped by consumer requirements.

In self marketing circles, a consumer-oriented approach is frequently advocated. Careers advisers, for example, often encourage individuals to acquire or develop better key skills (communication skills, ICT skills, etc.) in order to make them more attractive in the job market. Politicians and pundits who predict the death of the ‘job for life’ and the rise of the ‘portfolio career’ similarly advocate reskilling to meet changing market circumstances, and suggest continual personal reinvention to remain competitive in an increasingly competitive modern world.

In personal branding circles, by contrast, individuals are not usually advised to undertake a personal makeover in response to market needs. Indeed, some personal branding experts advise clients against trying to change themselves: “Work with what you’ve got! ... And make it special.” (Peters 1999). Whether the advice is aimed at job seekers or job changers,

individuals are encouraged to discover what they have to offer, by means of a self audit, and then to 'sell' this effectively to well-targeted clients as a branded 'package'. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Tom Peters' phrase: "the brand called you", a person-centred approach that has spawned several similar slogans, including 'Brand Yourself' (Andrusia & Haskins 2000), 'Brand U' (Hutchins no date), and 'me Inc' (Peters 1999). The emphasis appears to be firmly placed on the individual constructing a product based on themselves that can then be marketed as effectively as possible. This might seem to suggest that those who advise on personal branding are encouraging an approach that is based on an outmoded philosophy of marketing – viz. a product marketing approach.

There thus appears to be an unavoidable conflict. On the one hand, individuals are expected to respond to consumers in line with the marketing principle, but on the other hand they are advised to construct a 'truthful' brand image rooted in their unique set of attributes and attitudes. For Arruda (2003), for example, personal branding "is permission to be your authentic self". (There are clear parallels here with the situation in religious marketing (Shepherd 2004), where marketers who attempt to shape a religious offering for the market in line with the marketing principle are confronted by those who defend their religion because of its immutable articles of faith.) A closer reading of the personal branding literature, however, reveals a possible way out of this impasse. The solution rests on undertaking the self audit based on a full understanding of one's target market and one's competitors. The personal brand image is then constructed with these in mind, and therefore not only reflects a (rather than the) 'unique you', but is also effective in the presence of competing personal brands. Unfortunately, the advice given by some personal branding experts on micro-targeting potential markets rather undermines the supposed power of the brand image in guaranteeing personal success.

4.2 Brand conflict

In the real marketing world, there is often a blurred dividing line between the selling of a person and the selling of a product or organisation. For many entrepreneurs and independent traders, there is no clear dividing line between marketing their business and marketing themselves, and most marketing texts emphasise the importance of the individual's personality in personal selling. Understandably, the fortunes of the two are intimately intertwined.

Among employees, there may be a tension between representing one's organisation and selling oneself. If it is true that all contact made by an organisation's employees with its customers constitutes a form of marketing, then it is equally true that all customer contact also constitutes self marketing, or at least provides opportunities for self marketing. The employee is constantly in the marketplace as an individual; people with whom they come into contact are continually scanning and screening signals about their value and the comparative value of others around them. Sometimes, someone 'catches the eye' of a manager or prospective employer, and their observed qualities may lead to advancement or poaching. This suggests, on the one hand, a potential conflict of interest between the individual's advancement and that of the organisation by whom they are employed, and on the other hand a lack of separation between who one is and who one works for, and between the needs and rights of the employer and the needs and rights of the employed.

A form of brand conflict arises in the workplace whenever an employee publicises a personal brand during the course of their work that runs counter to the brand established by their employer. Where an organisation's corporate brand might stress a highly professional service, for example, an employee's personal brand might emphasise a casual and relaxed approach to

life. This is represented in its extreme form by those celebrities who, as Pringle (2004) notes, are employed to endorse well-known commercial brands, but who insist on doing so only in ways that serve to further enhance their own personal brand image. However, personal brands need not conflict with corporate brands. As Peters (1997, 1999) suggests, employees can benefit from developing a synergy between their personal brand and the corporate brand. Although some authors on personal branding (e.g. McNally & Speak 2002) outline strategies for aligning personal brand values to an employer's brand values, self-help advisers such as the North Carolina State University (NCSU nodate, but apparently lifted from Kaputa 2003) suggest that the employee puts themselves first:

“Don't think of yourself as an employee even if you work for a boss. Think of yourself as working for yourself, marketing your brand, YOU.”

The brand conflict that might result from following this advice raises interesting ethical and contractual questions. It is also a conflict that many consumer-facing companies (such as Starbucks with its 'Learning Path' induction programme for aspiring baristas) put considerable resources into preventing, by ensuring that the persona of those engaged in personal selling is closely aligned with the brand values of the product.

4.3 One brand or many?

One of the key branding precepts is that a brand should be simple, clear and consistent. Montoya *et al.* (2002) emphasise this fundamental point by proposing a 'Law of Specialization' for personal branding, which indicates the need for individuals to focus on one area of achievement or ability. In the 1930s and 1940s, the big Hollywood film studios understood this principle only too well, and created carefully constructed and consistent life stories around their most valuable stars, and took every step necessary to suppress stories that eroded these personal brand images. More recently, top musical artists have also understood this imperative, and instead of attempting to create multiple simultaneous brands – a clear recipe for consumer confusion – they have instead attempted to construct a sequence of brands when the time is ripe to reinvent themselves. (Notable examples include David Bowie, Madonna and Kylie Minogue.) Other well-known personalities have needed to adopt this strategy out of necessity, as in the case of sports stars when their playing careers come to an end, and they need to fashion a new public persona.

Despite the importance of developing a coherent brand image, it is normal for individuals to develop multiple roles, personas and self images in their personal, social and working lives. This raises the question as to whether it is acceptable for an individual to have multiple personal brands, one for each of their roles, personas or images? If the principles of mainstream branding are to be adhered to, then clearly such a strategy will inevitably lead to brand conflict and brand dilution. Individuals who construct several brand identities for themselves run the risk of having them contaminate or undermine one another in the marketplace. At best, this indicates imprecise targeting, and at worst it suggests ineffective personal brand management.

This predicament is of special concern to the TV and Internet generation. Tuckle (1997), for example, suggests that those who regularly interact with computers, and especially Netizens who participate in chat rooms and online role-playing games, develop and live out a collection of identities, rather than a single coherent one. She suggests that PC “windows have become a powerful metaphor for thinking about the self as a multiple, distributed system ... a decentred self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time” Tuckle (1997, p.14). She further suggests that on the Internet, “people are able to build a self by

cycling through many selves”, thus contributing to a sense of “identity as multiplicity” (Ibid, p.178). Holbrook (2001, p.409) also reminds us that in contrast to the simpler Freudian view of the self, Jung, Klein and Lacan suggest that the self is composed of multiple components. This raises the obvious question as to whether individuals who are used to constructing and living with multiple personas in their personal and social lives can readily construct a brand statement for business purposes that is centred on one ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ self.

Even if individuals are able to construct a personal brand, involving the identification and highlighting of a distinctive value offering, they may find it increasingly difficult to live this unique brand. Since a personal brand inevitably focuses on selected personal abilities and attributes, and excludes others, this may lead to tensions emerging as they attempt to live (up to) a constrained version of themselves. Organisations and political parties may be successful in ensuring that everyone connected with the brand stay ‘on message’, usually through a top-down communications strategy. But for the individual attempting to impose their business-related brand identity on other personal identities (e.g. as parent, lover, fitness fiend, nerd), this may not be so easily achieved. The resulting conflict has been the source of many comedic and tragic plot lines in film and on television.

4.4 Personal branding and visibility

For the individual looking to achieve success in business, the size of the self marketing challenge cannot be over-estimated. With hundreds of thousands of organisational brands and millions of product brands already competing for attention, the tens of millions of individuals seeking to carve out a personal business niche in the marketplace face a daunting prospect. And if the problems posed by the numbers of competitors in the local marketplace are huge, then they must appear almost insurmountable in the emerging global marketplace. The individual who has constructed a personal brand must be intuitively aware that the distribution of awareness corresponds to the famous Zipf curve, in which a tiny fraction of the population (the so-called ‘celebrities’) benefit from a majority of public awareness, and everyone else has to live on scraps. For the young professional seeking a foot on the first ladder of public awareness, the sisyphian metaphor is only too real.

The problem of individual visibility has been much studied by cultural and media analysts in recent years, especially in relation to notions of fame and celebrity (e.g. Gamson 1994; Holbrook 2001; Carducci 2004). Celebrity is closely linked to the growing imperative in modern culture for achieving personal visibility (Rein *et al.* 1997), and this is echoed in self marketing where the quest for visibility is perhaps the single most important driver for personal branding. Personal branding is essentially an attention-getting device, and is frequently sold as the key to helping the aspiring professional to achieve competitive advantage in a crowded marketplace. The modern world, and especially the emerging online environments of the Internet and the cell phone, represent an increasingly competitive ‘attention economy’ (Davenport & Beck 2001), which poses a significant challenge for those in business wishing to have their voice heard. There is as yet little empirical evidence, however, to support claims that personal branding is the optimal solution to the visibility problem in a business context.

4.5 False promises, or the marketing of an illusion

Personal branding can involve several forms of deception. One deception involves the raising of expectations as to the efficacy of personal branding above the level that is supportable by logic or evidence. (Recall Peters’ promise about personal branding in 1997: “everyone has a chance to stand out”.) One obvious flaw in this logic is that simply having a brand, personal or otherwise, cannot of itself guarantee business success, as the many thousands of brand

failures in mainstream business amply testify (Haig 2003). And there is much to question in Arruda's personal branding credo: "What makes us unique makes us successful" (Arruda 2005). The obvious caveats are usually missing in most books and Web sites on personal branding, yet they are of considerable significance to the aspirations and development plans of tomorrow's marketing professionals.

Another flaw is embedded in the way in which personal branding is frequently sold as a must-have top-up to technical competence. Where skills merely provide a business individual with ability, it is argued, a personal brand guarantees their visibility. As one personal branding guru (Montoya 2005) puts it: "pure talent alone is not enough to reach the pinnacle of success". Because, as we have seen, visibility is deemed essential for business success in the modern attention economy, and personal branding is offered as a means of increasing visibility, it has considerable appeal. However, since there are innumerable individuals vying for top-dog status in the marketplace, while there is rarely room for more than one guru, authority or expert, Darwinian selection principles will always apply. Some personal branding authors and consultants (e.g. Kaputa 2003) are careful to suggest that personal brands should only be constructed after analysing the market and one's competitors, and others suggest that personal branding should be pursued within a specific business niche. (This targeting appears in the title of such books as Bly (2001), and others of its kind.) But even with this caveat, the appeal of personal branding as a guarantee of visibility and therefore business success is deceptive, because there are simply too many people competing even within specific business niches to permit more than a few of them to share high-level success. (Even Warhol restricted his vision of fame for the masses to a fleeting, 15-minute slice.) Holbrook suggests that when pushed to this extreme, the cultivation of personal brand equity becomes similar to the acquisition of celebrity status. "Just as brand equity refers to the marketable value of a brand name above and beyond what is justified by the quality of the offering ... celebrity refers to fame above and beyond what is justified by actual accomplishment" (Holbrook 2001, p.423).

A second logical weakness in the appeal of personal branding is that while it might benefit early adopters, the law of diminishing returns will eventually set in. The editorial for Andrusia and Haskins' book (2000) argues the need for individuals to brand themselves, "thereby creating a strong, positive sense of ourselves and our services that is different and better than what our peers have to offer". Initial advantage may well accrue to today's few marketing graduates who learn the art of personal branding, but when a majority emerge from university equipped with a Personal Brand Statement, what comparative advantage will they then enjoy? Kleiner (2001) points out that many of the most successful business people do not have their own personal Websites, and hypothesises that many future job seekers will seek their fortunes on the back of established commercial brands rather than by developing their own.

The second form of deception found in personal branding involves the raising of expectations by personally branded business individuals among their clients. When an individual supplies a product or performs a business service that falls short of the expectations formed by their brand image, the client can expect to feel short-changed. This form of deception is increasingly common in online environments, where Netizens frequently construct an elaborate persona, not only to mask their real identity (e.g. the adoption of a chat room name) but also as a means of developing relationships with other Netizens. Where the purpose of this subterfuge is idle chat, this breaking of one of the primary rules of personal branding may be relatively inconsequential. But where individuals are setting up some formal exchange, whether social (as in finding a partner) or economic (as in finding a job), then there is scope for expectation failure when the reality of the first meeting between an online dyad reveals the fantasy or fictional element in the personal brand. In the social context of online dating,

McReary (2002) adds a comment which suggests that the final victim of delusion through personal branding might be oneself:

“As online ads become more aggressive and clever and self-consciously crafted, what impact does this have on the human interactions that result from them? ... Can there possibly be any room left for the real, flawed, fragile human being behind the ad?”

4.6 Personal engineering

There appears to be a contradiction at the heart of the advice issued from the growing ranks of personal branding experts. This contradiction is well illustrated by material available on the Web site of a well-known author and consultant on personal branding, Peter Montoya (Montoya 2005). On the one hand, Montoya suggests that a personal brand describes the quintessential you; it reveals “your strengths, values, goals and personality”, and “tells people who you are, what you do and why you’re unique”. It adds value to who you are, and provides competitive marketing advantage, by summarising the current you “in a compelling and persuasive manner”. On the other hand, although he is careful to suggest that “a Personal Brand is not you; it’s the public perception of your personality and abilities”, he also argues that the creation of this perception involves the branded individual living the brand they have constructed. For example, the personally branded individual is urged to:

“Express yourself and what you stand for to everyone you come into contact with – your professional target audience, your neighbours, your family, your colleagues, even the man on the street. Do this constantly and consistently.”

In other words, although it may not be the real you, “branding is something you’ve got to live daily to reap the benefits”. This kind of advice is echoed from other Web pages: “Your lifestyle is a reflection of your personal brand – and should be consistent with your business brand” (Arruda 2005). Arruda goes even further when he advises his readers that “you need to align your brand environment -- that is, everything that surrounds you – with your personal brand” (Ibid). Despite reassurances from some quarters that adopting a personal brand “doesn’t mean you are losing ‘you the person’; it does mean you are shaping the perception people have of ‘you the person’” (Montoya 2005). In other words, the drift of most expert advice seems to be that individuals can no longer afford to express the multiple personalities they used to have, or to live a life with varying attitudes and contrasting goals. Having defined their personal brand, individuals are now compelled to become this brand; it must dictate the single persona that they are now allowed to be. Of course, this is entirely in line with the principle that a brand must be clear, focused and consistent. But whether this emasculation of an individual’s ‘natural’ personality is something that everyone will find easy to achieve, or whether the process is likely to have negative psychological and social side effects as time passes, is rarely discussed. As the number of personally branded individuals grows, research will be essential to reveal the answers to several disturbing questions about this brave new world of personal engineering.

4.7 Personal and/or group branding?

Personal branding represents a self-centred and highly individualistic approach to self marketing. Peters (1997) argues that “being the CEO of Me Inc. requires you to act selfishly”, and many authors echo Montoya and Vandehey’s (2003) suggestion that in constructing a brand you must reflect “who [you] are, authentically and without anything held back”. This latter emphasis has, as suggested earlier, led to the use of slogans that emphasise the individual ‘YOU’. By contrast, there is little evidence of slogans such as ‘Brand US’ or ‘the brand that is us’ being promoted to counter the current hegemony of ‘Brand U’ or ‘the brand

that is you'. (Wredon's 2004 'the brand called we' is a singular exception.) In America, at least, the passion for personal branding is a powerful reflection of broader political debates between individualism and collectivism, and reflects too the breakdown of corporate loyalty and the growth of free agents in business (Pink 2001). (Peters 1999 notably rails against the Dilbertian view of corporate employment and loyalty, and approvingly echoes Ayn Rand's individualist philosophy.) This person-centred emphasis is also reminiscent of attempts to individualise learning that began back in the 1960s through the use of programmed learning technology, and which was more recently associated with interactive Web-based multimedia. It was also briefly appropriated by HM Government in its advocacy of 'personalised learning' (Milliband 2003). However, as Vygotsky (1978) and others have shown, learning is a social as well as a private act. A similar reminder is perhaps needed, in an age of one-to-one marketing, that self marketing and personal branding might often work best when undertaken collaboratively with others.

The individualistic approach to branding largely ignores the potential for branding individuals as parts of a group. A powerful example of co-branding in a social context occurs in youth gang culture, with its use of visual markers to establish both identity and territory, and it is also apparent in the branding of many pop groups. The potential of a collaborative approach is also being realised in some business environments in the form of co-production, co-marketing, co-management and co-branding arrangements (e.g. Wikström 1996; Jancic & Zabkar 2002). The development of what might be called co-personal branding will require the design of collaborative versions of personal branding audits and personal brand statements. It may not always be easy to identify those contexts in which an individual approach is most appropriate and those in which a collaborative approach is more beneficial, but this difficulty should not prevent the attempt being made. Nor may it always be a simple matter to apportion responsibilities and rewards within a co-branding partnership. But, as in marriages between consenting adults, it should not be too difficult to arrange some form of pre-nuptial contract. Graham (2001) is one of the few authors to suggest, in a personal branding context, that adding value to others may be more effective than adding value primarily to oneself.

4.8 Towards complementary theoretical frameworks

Although self marketing and personal branding are in some ways associated with, and developed from, principles and concepts in mainstream marketing, the discussion thus far suggests that they are not yet satisfactorily embedded in a suitable theoretical marketing framework. It has also been suggested that it might be appropriate to take a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding the behaviour implicit in self marketing and personal branding. It is worth recalling in this context that Bagozzi (1974, 1975, 1978) saw no need for turf wars between marketing and other disciplines in developing a theory of market exchange.

The relevance of identity theory has already been discussed, and there would appear to be some potential in exploring further Mead's (1934) anthropological approach to identity which views it as constituted through the projection of the self onto others. An even more appealing theoretical context is provided by Goffman's (1956) studies of the self in everyday life, which take a dramaturgical approach to understanding mundane human interaction. Using a symbolic interactionist perspective, Goffman interprets interaction between individuals as a 'performance'. In the course of his study, he develops the concept of the 'front', which is eerily prescient of the concept of the personal brand image. He defines front as: "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (Goffman 1956, p.22). Although Goffman sees identity as arising through interaction with others, in a personal branding context it might be more appropriate to view the formation of the identity or persona as

preceding the performance (i.e. in the form of the personal brand image), which is then acted out and consolidated through that performance.

Finally, it is important to highlight the relative myopia of personal branding in relation to theories and models of personal development. As has been indicated earlier, personal branding is essentially an inside-out process that serves to encapsulate the current strengths and uniqueness of the individual in relation to a targeted market. In general, the state of development of the individual is taken as a given. There are significant theories of personal development, in the professional context, which provide a suitable and necessary complement to this status quo approach. Among the better known of these are Schön's concept of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön 1983), and the Chartered Institute of Personal Development's vision of the 'thinking performer' (CIPD 2005).

5.0 Conclusion

It is now time to reconsider some of the broad questions posed at the outset of this study. Does a coherent statement of personal branding emerge from the literature surveyed? The brief answer is no. Not only are there gaps and missing elements, but there are also a number of disquieting contradictions and logical failures, both within individual accounts and between accounts. In addition, there appears to be little attempt at evaluation, which is perhaps unsurprising given that we are considering the development of a 'new' idea.

To conclude, an attempt has been made to explore the current popular interest in self marketing and personal branding from the perspective of marketing as an academic discipline. A particular challenge for the discipline is whether it can absorb these twin ideas into its ever-broadening pantheon, and at the same time resolve some of the conceptual and practical issues that attend their advocacy and practice. To put not too fine point on it, can the discipline of marketing reclaim self marketing and personal branding from the enthusiasts? For the budding professional marketer, the authors of self-help books, career advisors and Web pundits appear to be the primary sources of advice currently available on the subject. Is it beyond the wit or ambition of mainstream marketing to put its own seal of approval on these potentially crucial ideas?

Notes

1. The first part of the title of this paper was suggested by a chapter sub-heading ("From cattle to Coke") in Schmidt and Ludlow (2002).
2. One indication of the culture-specific and geographically circumscribed nature of this literature is the fact that, at the time of writing (late 2004 to early 2005), almost all of the books reviewed were unavailable in university libraries in the UK. Requests for inter-library loans to the British Library also drew a blank.
3. In a companion paper (Shepherd 2005), the author explores the practice of self marketing and personal branding among groups of aspiring marketing professionals by means of a series of surveys.

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