

# MBA Review

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## The Self-Branding Process for Career Development

Conduct a  
Self-Assessment

Understand the  
Total Product  
Concept

Research the  
Marketplace

Develop the  
Brand

Market the  
Brand



# The Art of Self-Branding

## Making Yourself Relevant to Employers

*Joel R Evans\**

**In seeking a new job or a promotion from an existing job, it is essential to present what marketers call a “unique selling proposition.” This represents the set of skills that are distinctive and desirable to employers that other job candidates do not possess. In today’s highly competitive marketplace, it is imperative that you develop such a skill set and promote yourself accordingly.**

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**S**elf-branding occurs when an individual develops and markets him- or herself in the same manner as a brand of a product would be marketed. A ‘product’ is a bundle of attributes that are offered to a consumer. For a physical product such as a computer monitor, this refers to its size, thickness of the screen, picture clarity, etc. For a service such as banking, this refers to the location of outlets, hours of operation, availability of ATMs vs. tellers, etc. These are all tangible attributes. The best products also focus on their intangible attributes. Although the Apple iPod and iPhone are superior products, they also offer the intangible attribute of being ‘cool’ or ‘cutting edge.’ In TV commercials for its Mac computers, Apple has spent years showing that its users ‘get it’ while Windows users are out-of-touch ‘nerds’.

When the term product positioning is used, this is the intent: “A strategic position differentiates you from others. It shows that you have something to offer that’s unique or difficult to replicate.”<sup>1</sup> So, how do we create our own distinctive strategic position (self-brand) in

marketing ourselves to employers? To succeed in self-branding, a job applicant:

Must work quite hard to make sure that he/she is perceived as providing some combination of unique features (product differentiation) and that these features are desired by the target market (prospective employers), thereby creating a unique selling proposition. When a job applicant is unknown, he/she must clearly communicate his/her attributes: What is her/his background? How does this person fulfill the requirements for the specific job? How is the person better than the competition (other job applicants)? When a job applicant is known in the marketplace, he/she must proactively reinforce a positive image and communicate why that person’s career is still its ascendancy. For a long-term executive in an industry, once marketplace perceptions are formed, they may be hard to alter.<sup>2</sup>

Here are some examples of product positioning for various types of personnel with MBA degrees—and how these people can develop themselves as brands. With self-branding, job applicants seek to create a unique, desirable, and memorable image for themselves:

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<sup>1</sup> Rhonda Abrams, “Sorting Out Your Strategic Position,” <http://www.inc.com/articles/2000/09/20268.html>

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Joel R Evans and Barry Herman, *Marketing in the 21st Century*, 11th edition, Cengage Learning, 2010. See <http://www.atomicdog.com>

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- Bill is a recent MBA graduate specializing in accounting. He has also earned a CPA and has three years of full-time work experience with a mid-size accounting firm. Self-branding position: Bill has specialized in setting up 401(k) plans for small businesses. He offers clients a personal touch and provides regular updates when the laws change. He has also made presentations at many seminars to potential clients. Bill is now ready to become a manager at a larger accounting firm that handles 401(k) plans.
- Jane is an MBA graduate from 2002 specializing in finance. She has seven years of full-time work experience, first with a small brokerage firm and then with a larger firm. Self-branding
- Jane recently earned a CFP (Certified Financial Planner) designation to complement her job skills and to offer another credential to her existing clients. Her goal is to get several of her brokerage clients to also use her in setting up long-range financial plans.<sup>3</sup>
- Jim is a 1997 MBA graduate specializing in human resource management. He has 12 years of full-time work experience, most recently as an equal opportunity compliance officer at a large corporation. Self-branding position: Jim wants to become a vice-president of human resources at a mid-sized company that has a diverse work force. He is an expert in employee and community relations, company hiring practices, and employee training programs.
- Rachel is a 1989 MBA graduate specializing in marketing. She has twenty years of full-time work experience, beginning as an assistant brand manager and progressing to her current position as a senior product manager with eight brand managers reporting to her. Rachel has always worked for large firms in the personal care industry. Self-branding position: Rachel knows that her company was recently sold and that her incoming boss is inclined to bring in his own people. To make her case, Rachel has

decided to position herself as the “turnaround guru.” This entails preparing a portfolio that highlights all of the failing/declining brands that she has revived in her years in product management. Thus, she is self-branding herself to re-enter the marketplace if her current position cannot be saved.

What do these product positioning (self-branding) examples all have in common? Each person has plotted his/her career to stand out with a unique, desirable, and memorable set of job skills.

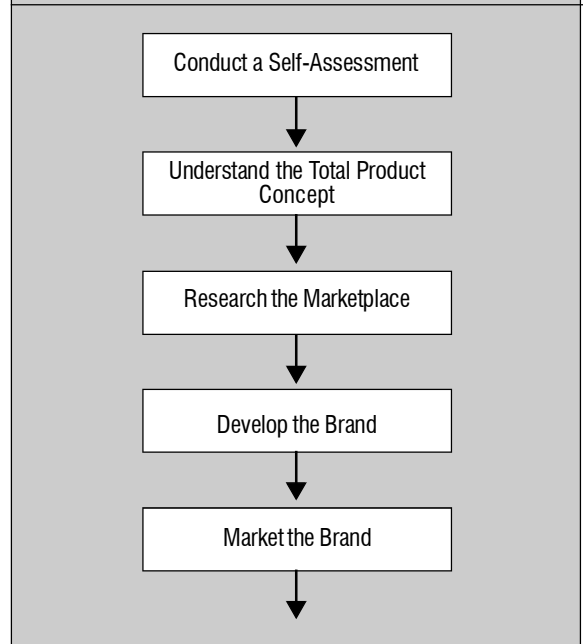
### How Can We Successfully Self-Brand Ourselves?

Several steps are necessary for us to position ourselves as unique, desirable, and memorable potential employees, as shown in Figure and discussed next.

### Conduct a Self-Assessment

Throughout the MBA curriculum, professors often spend considerable time on the topic of

**Figure: The Self-Branding Process for Career Development**



<sup>3</sup> Copyright Joel R Evans, Zarb School of Business, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, 11549 position:

SWOT (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) analysis as it applies to companies. Yet, this concept is equally important in devising a career strategy for oneself. It is essential that a thorough, realistic (honest) self-assessment be conducted. You need to start here!

In a series of career books (Careers in Financial Services, Careers in Marketing, and Careers in Retailing) Barry Berman and I presented a series of questions to assist individuals in doing a proper personal assessment. This is an adaptation of those questions:

1. What are my greatest strengths?
2. What are my greatest weaknesses?
3. What types of activities do I most like doing?
4. What types of activities do I least like doing?
5. Do I like working with people? With numbers? With computers?
6. Am I a self-starter or do I need a structured work environment?
7. Do I want a career that will constantly challenge me?
8. Do I have the potential to supervise people?
9. What are my long-term career goals in terms of job advancement? In terms of earnings?
10. How important is career success to me? Will my career be more important to me than anything else?
11. What kinds of jobs are expected to flourish over the next several years? What kinds face decreasing demand by employers over the next several years?
12. What industries and companies offer the best job opportunities over the next several years? The worst opportunities?
13. Would I rather work in a large or a small company?
14. Would I like to eventually work for myself?
15. Am I willing to relocate to get a good job?
16. In 10 years, would I be unhappy if I did not hold a top management position?
17. What would be my ideal entry-level, career-oriented job? What would be my ideal mid-level, career-oriented job?
18. For what job am I currently best qualified?
19. What should I do to bridge the gap between questions 15 and 16?
20. How flexible am I in my career options?

### **Understand the Total Product Concept**

The “total product concept” was introduced by the Harvard Business School’s Theodore Levitt about 30 years ago in a classic *Harvard Business Review* article entitled, “Marketing Success Through Differentiation—of Anything”. In another classic *Harvard Business Review* article, Levitt wrote about “Marketing Intangible Products and Product Intangibles.” Let’s see how these principles may be applied to the second step in the self-branding process for a person’s career.

Three elements of the total product concept are relevant: the expected product, the augmented product, and the potential product. In the case of a prospective job opening, the “expected product” represents the minimum job requirements set by the employer. These typically include the minimum level of education and work experience required for a given job. The employer will not even consider any applicant who does not meet these requirements. Thus, an accounting firm may not consider anyone who does not already have a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) designation; and a consumer products company may not consider anyone for a brand manager position who does not have experience as an assistant brand manager. In striving to be different from other job applicants, it is essential to keep in mind that these minimum requirements must be met—no matter how many other skills that a person may have.

Once job applicants have satisfied a potential employer that they meet the minimum job requirements, the next phase is the “augmented product,” which comprises the attributes that differentiate one qualified candidate from another. To continue with the previous examples, a job applicant at an accounting firm, in addition to

having a CPA designation, may have extensive experience in handling client audits with the Internal Revenue Service—with a 95% success rate in reducing or eliminating the additional taxes claimed by the IRS. A brand manager applicant at a consumer products company, in addition to having worked as an assistant brand manager, may have participated in the launch of one of the most profitable new products ever introduced at his/her current firm. It is the augmented product characteristics that separate the winning job candidate from the others.

In some instances, a person may anticipate job skills that are not yet present in the marketplace but that will be important in the future. He/she then gains a further competitive advantage over other job candidates through ‘potential product’ skills. Let’s continue with the prior examples. The accounting job applicant, who is a CPA with significant experience, may also have completed several computer programming courses. As a result, that person would be able to write customized software for the accounting firm that would give it a substantial edge over its competitors. The brand manager applicant, who has experience as a successful assistant brand manager, may also be one of the first recipients of the new “Certificate in Eco-Responsible Marketing”, sponsored by the Direct Marketing Association.

Product tangibility involves two aspects of job skills: tangible attributes and intangible attributes. Tangible job attributes are one’s education, current job description, a client list, and similar factors. Intangible job attributes are one’s passion for work, the ability to be a team player, communication skills, and similar factors. Both come into play in the job search.

In sum, the best applicants meet all job requirements (expected product attributes), offer distinctive advantages over others (augmented product attributes), and plan for the future (potential product attributes). They must also offer a passion for work and other intangible skills.

## Research the Marketplace

The third step in self-branding is doing research on the job marketplace to determine: What jobs are available? What are the current requirements for those jobs? What are the trends in the field?

To gain greater insights, it is recommended that sources such as these be consulted:

- Manpower Inc. (<http://www.manpower.com/research/research.cfrn>): “Economists, journalists, university researchers, and think tanks are among the thousands of thought leaders who closely follow Manpower research products, utilizing our data to help them assess and forecast the health and direction of the world’s labor markets. They look to Manpower to provide information for today and insight on tomorrow.” More than 30 countries are covered.
- *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (<http://www.bls.gov/OCO>): “For hundreds of different types of US jobs, the Handbook tells you the training and education needed, earnings, expected job prospects, what workers do on the job, and working conditions. In addition, the Handbook gives you job search tips, links to information about the job market in each state, and more.”
- Datamonitor (<http://www.datamonitor.com>): “Reports, briefs, interactive models, company, and country profiles” for dozens of countries, numerous industries, and thousands of companies. Available via online library resources such as Business Source Premier.
- Standard & Poor’s Industry Surveys ([http://sandp.ecnext.com/coms2/page\\_industry](http://sandp.ecnext.com/coms2/page_industry)): “Come up to speed on the players and events impacting over 50 of the largest North American and global industries. Ideal for management consultants, strategic planners, money managers, public and academic librarians, students, and business faculty; the Surveys enable readers to think and act like industry insiders.” Available via online library resources such as Business Source Premier.

## Develop the Brand

In step four, the self-brand is developed. The focus is on addressing these questions:

- What is the prospective employer looking for in a job candidate?
- Do I fulfill the expected minimum requirements for the job?
- Do I possess augmented product skills that set us apart from other applicants?
- Am I aware of emerging trends that offer the opportunity to offer cutting-edge job skills? Do I have such skills?
- After reading my resume and/or interviewing me. What are the three or four points that I would most like a prospective employer to remember about me? What lasting impression am I looking to make?

It is this last question that forms the basis for self-branding. As Tom Peters, co-author of the iconic book *In Search of Excellence*, noted: “The good news—and it is largely good news—is that everyone has a chance to stand out. Everyone has a chance to learn, improve, and build up their skills. Everyone has a chance to be a brand worthy of remark.”<sup>4</sup> Importantly, “By this point, you should stand out as a well-defined brand the rest of us can sum up in 15 words or less. You’ve likely abandoned such old-school terms as ‘employee’ or, worse, ‘manager.’ You’re CEO of Me Inc., reinventing yourself every few years while balancing a series of provocative, fascinating projects.”<sup>5</sup>

In building one’s personal brand, Randall Hansen says that: “Branding is essential to career advancement because branding helps define who you are, how you are great, and why you should be sought out. Branding is your reputation. Branding is about building a name for yourself, showcasing what sets you apart from others, and describing the added value you bring to a situation. Most job-seekers are not proactive in establishing and building their career brand,

letting their actions speak for them when seeking promotions or new jobs. But why not take the time to master some very basic tactics that can help build your career brand and make you a much more attractive employee or job-seeker? Remember, if you don’t brand yourself, others will for you. And while you may be happy and secure in your job now, you really never know when that will change.”<sup>6</sup>

What is the takeaway from the preceding comments? It is imperative that a person plan his/her career carefully and consider how to develop the best content to go on the resume. Too many ‘coaches’ merely help people design the look of their resumes or reword ordinary job skills. But, it is developing the content (especially acquiring augmented job skills) that is really the key.

## Market the Brand

In step five, the self-brand is marketed. The focus is on addressing these questions:

- What would I like the potential employer to know about me?
- How do I demonstrate that I fulfill the expected minimum requirements for the job?
- How do I demonstrate that I possess augmented product skills that set me apart from other job candidates?
- How am I memorable?

There are various tools that can be utilized to market our self-brand. Here are how some of them may be used.

The cover letter is probably the most underappreciated method for marketing oneself to prospective employers. It allows us to briefly summarize our expected and augmented product attributes, as well as to highlight some of our intangible assets that do not readily come across on a resume. It also is a vehicle that demonstrates our written communication skills.

Typically, job applicants spend a lot of time on the resume. Nonetheless, there are lessons to be

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/10/brandyou.html>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/07\\_34/b4047419.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/07_34/b4047419.htm)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.quintcareers.com/careerbranding.html>

learned here. First, many resume coaches advocate that the resume not begin with a summary of qualifications or a career objective because that limits one's job possibilities. This is wrong for two reasons: In today's PC age, it is easy to prepare multiple versions of a resume. More importantly, how can one leave a self-brand impression without providing a memorable synopsis for the prospective employer to recall (such as "MBA with 10 years of managerial experience in the health care industry as an auditor of nursing homes") after leafing through 100 resumes?

Second, while you make sure that expected job attributes are succinctly—but clearly—noted in the resume, spend more emphasis on augmented/potential job attributes. Concentrate on the job skills you want to highlight and stay away from excess verbiage. Show the breadth of your skills and how you have gained more responsibilities over your career.

A job fair is a good place to make contacts and to practice and refine one's self-brand message. At a job fair, each prospective employer is likely to be inundated by job candidates. So a clear, on-target self-branding position is necessary to stand out in the crowd. Go to as many job fairs as you can. See what works and does not work. Learn!

Regarding the interview, keep this advice in mind. (1) Be prepared: Know the industry, the company, and the job. (2) Focus: Concentrate on how you meet the expected attributes of the job and how you offer specific additional skills. (3) Be articulate and maintain eye contact. Most importantly: Listen and be respectful. (4) Be able to sum up your self-brand (job qualifications) in 15 words or less. Try to end with that.

Talk to your references. Make sure that they have a copy of your resume and that they are clear about your self-brand positioning.

Good luck! ♦♦

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