

New and Noteworthy

Your Professional Brand

Jennifer A. Bartlett

"Start right now: as of this moment you're going to think of yourself differently! You're not an "employee" of General Motors, you're not a "staffer" at General Mills, you're not a "worker" at General Electric or a "human resource" at General Dynamics (oops, it's gone!). Forget the Generals! You don't "belong to" any company for life, and your chief affiliation isn't to any particular "function." You're not defined by your job title and you're not confined by your job description.

*Starting today you are a brand."*¹

Do you think of yourself as having a defined brand? The last "New and Noteworthy" column in this journal discussed resources to help you market your library or information center to your current and existing clientele. This time, we turn to the equally important task of your own professional marketing, or branding. It's not necessary to be a Library Journal Mover & Shaker or attend an expensive invitation-only leadership conference to raise your profile among your peers. However, as several recent publications point out, it IS necessary to define and communicate your own professional goals, experience and vision. How and why should you be marketing yourself as an information professional and library leader?

To begin, popular writer and blogger Karen Schneider has written an excellent short column for *American Libraries* discussing issues about personal branding.² Featuring observations from colleagues Andromeda Yelton, Bohyun Kim, Ingrid Adams, Kate Sheehan, and Brett Bonfield, the column addresses many of the concerns that librarians have about promoting themselves: the changing nature of professional images and career focus, overestimation of brand "control," and authenticity. There are links to further research about branding, as well as to a well-attended, interesting program on personal branding for new librarians moderated by Kim (and featuring Bonfield and Yelton, among others) at the 2011 American Library Association Midwinter Meeting in San Diego.³

The column is especially useful for those librarians who aren't sure if they need to be "branding" themselves at all. Provocative questions to ponder include "what's my personal mantra?" and "if I asked my friends to describe me, what would they say?" Schneider makes it clear that personal branding isn't for everyone: "...Many wonderful job candidates don't have distinctive, highly public personal brands for any number of reasons... there are also

many powerful, effective librarians who do their 'moving and shaking' below the radar. We are blessed with an abundance of tremendous librarians in our profession, and quite a few of them lead from behind, through quiet example, low-key strategy, and sotto voce mentoring."

The theme of personal leadership continues in a new Chandos Information Professional Series title from Julie Still, *Managing Your Brand: Career Management and Personal PR for Librarians*.⁴ Although the title of the book implies a branding focus, Still does not discuss advertising and marketing strategies so much as she does basic career development and planning. Focused on academic libraries, the book discusses areas of concern including initial career planning, tracking and measurement of activities, and the three legs of any academic librarian's career: day-to-day primary responsibilities (librarianship), scholarship, and service. Still, a veteran librarian, writer and presenter, brings her substantial experience to this book, packing a career's worth of valuable information and advice into a small package.

Still presents an especially helpful metaphor in Chapter 7: Building Walls, Towers and Bridges. "If visuals help you," writes Still, "remember to view you individual assets as building blocks or construction materials of some kind. If a person's home is their castle it should have walls, towers, and bridges. We will be building those" (99). Walls, the basic feature of the house, are a solid work history, including elements from librarianship, scholarship, and service. Towers are a librarian's specialty or level of expertise: a skill set or strength that sets the librarian apart. Finally, bridges, "devices that get us from one place to another" (101), represent career goals and aspirations.

Although well-written and interesting, the dense textual layout of *Managing Your Brand* may put some readers off, but those who persist will find a wealth of useful information about tenure, work life balance, work support groups, social media, mentoring, and other key topics. Although the index is a bit sparing in detail, the logical organization of the chapters and the thorough list of references for further reading adds to the book's value for academic and non-academic audiences.

Although the term "Web 2.0" is a bit dated now, Julia Gross' *Building Your Library Career with Web 2.0* is a solid primer for the appropriate use of social media in professional marketing, and offers an excellent discussion of the importance of why you should market yourself in the first place.⁵ Librarians in general can be somewhat hesitant to use the term "marketing," equating it with sales, but as Gross emphasizes, there are many good reasons to think of marketing as a career strategy: "In the career context, marketing is not just about job seeking, promoting yourself and differentiating yourself from the competition. It is also about taking a long-term approach to career development and thinking broadly about where your skills may take you, how to develop them, and how to work towards your career goals" (57).

The book's 11 chapters go beyond "how-to-do-it" explanations of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, covering topics including online privacy, lifelong learning, networking, and e-mentoring. The material is well-organized into three basic "cornerstone" emphases: marketing, networking, and professional development. The first three chapters discuss Web 2.0 and social networking, and the remaining chapters talk about how these technologies can be used in these activities.

With numerous screenshots and illustrative charts, this practical book is highly readable and easily understandable by readers at most levels of technical expertise. References and suggestions for further reading are given in each chapter, along with an abstract of the topic covered. Of course, the danger in writing a book discussing platform-specific technologies is that those technologies rapidly change and sometimes become obsolete (a problem that Gross acknowledges in her introduction; remember Bloglines?). However, Gross has gone beyond these platforms in discussing the importance of marketing, professional development, and networking as overall career strategies, regardless of platform.

A big part of any career strategy, as Jodi Philbrick and Ana Cleveland write in a 2015 *Medical Reference Services Quarterly* article,⁶ is answering the question, "what makes you special?" (181). "Everyone has a personal brand, whether they know it or not," they write, "because it how they are viewed by others. The most important thing is that you should be the one that crafts the perception that others have of you by managing your personal brand 'strategically, consistently, and effectively'" (182-3).

The article begins with a brief history of branding, from cattle branding in the 1800s (a bit disconcerting, yet thought-provoking image! ⁷) to its rise in business literature as popularized by Tom Peters in the late 1990s (the source of the quotation at the top of this column). It then moves to a six-step process in building a personal brand, namely (1) taking an introspective look, (2) understanding the brand that may already exist, (3) developing your personal brand mantra, (4) crafting your physical footprint, (5) creating your digital footprint, and (6) communicating your message. Each step is clearly defined and placed firmly in a personal, introspective context; the creation and maintenance of a professional brand, the authors emphasize, is by definition a personal, unique process for each person. Easy to read and well supplemented with examples and links, this article should be useful for librarians in any field and at any stage of their careers.

In addition to being a part of the librarian's career development plan, personal branding can also help us serve our patrons better. The University of Iowa's Dan Gall, aka "Dan the Librarian," looks at professional branding as a tool for reaching out to distance learning students in a 2012 article in the *Journal of Library Administration*.⁸ "In spite of the title," Gall writes, "this article is not even about shameless self-promotion—an area of the literature that could, perhaps, use more quality information. This article ... is, fundamentally, about

librarians getting credit for what we do and what we do well. Ultimately, it is about managing and effectively using your reputation” (550).

Gall initially addresses branding from a corporate context, in particular the idea of “relationship marketing,” a strategy by which businesses build mutually beneficial relationships of long standing with their customers; this is certainly a familiar and desirable model for libraries and information centers. This type of marketing model is directly applicable to relationships with an often isolated library clientele: the remote or distance learning student. Using the brand name “Dan the Librarian,” Gall has been able to build an easily recognizable identity that encourages distance learning students to communicate with him on a long-term basis.

To brand or not to brand? To again quote business guru Tom Peters, “Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding. 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.”⁹

What is your professional philosophy regarding your own marketing and promotion?

Jennifer A. Bartlett (jen.bartlett@uky.edu) is Head of Reference Services at the University of Kentucky Libraries.

Published: August 2015

¹ Peters, Tom. August/September 1997. The Brand Called You. *Fast Company*. Available at <http://www.fastcompany.com/28905/brand-called-you>.

² Schneider, Karen G. 2012. Personal Branding for Librarians: Distinguishing Yourself from the Professional Herd. *American Libraries*. Available at <http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2012/11/06/personal-branding-for-librarians>.

³ Also see an overview of the talk at Kim’s blog, *Library Hat*, at <http://www.bohyunkim.net/blog/archives/1048>; slides from the “Personal Branding for New Librarians” presentation at the 2011 Association of College & Research Libraries National Conference at <http://www.slideshare.net/bohyunkim/personal-branding-for-new-librarians-standing-out-and-stepping-up>; and a video featuring Kim at <http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/ala-midwinter-meeting-2011-personal-branding/>.

⁴ Still, Julie. 2015. *Managing Your Brand: Career Management and Personal PR for Librarians*. Waltham, Mass.: Chandos Publishing.

⁵ Gross, Julia. 2012. *Building Your Library Career with Web 2.0*. Oxford, UK: Chandos Pub. The term "Web 2.0" refers to those next-generation technologies that focus on online, interactive community building such as blogs, wikis, Facebook, Twitter, and so on.

⁶ Philbrick Jodi L., and Ana D. Cleveland. 2015. "Personal Branding: Building your Pathway to Professional Success". *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*. 34(2): 181-9.

⁷ For a fun, interesting piece on the importance of branding with a Western theme, see Barbara Quint's March 2012 "Searcher's Voice" in *Searcher* 20(2): 4-6. Quint emphasizes that the failure to effectively brand our collections services as librarians contributes to our patrons assuming that the Internet can take care of all their searching problems.

⁸ Gall, Dan. 2012. Librarian Like a Rock Star: Using Your Personal Brand to Promote Your Services and Reach Distant Users. *Journal of Library Administration*, 52(6-7): 549-58.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2012.707952>. The article was originally published in the *Journal of Library Administration*, Vol. 50, Issues 5–6, pages 628–637, 2010.

⁹ Peters, Tom. August/September 1997. The Brand Called You. *Fast Company*. Available at <http://www.fastcompany.com/28905/brand-called-you>.