

Auditing the “Me Inc.”: Teaching personal branding on LinkedIn through an experiential learning method

(Original Teaching Idea – Single)

Courses: Public Relations, Business and Professional Communication, Training and Development, Digital Media Strategies, Digital Communications

Learning goal/objectives: By the end of the activity, students will be able to synthesize the key attributes of the notion of personal branding and to apply them in their future professional communications on social media.

Introduction and rationale

Employers increasingly rely on social media platforms to screen potential talents especially the employment-oriented sites such as LinkedIn (Jobvite, 2018). Candidates strive to secure employers' attention in the competitive job market. Accordingly, candidates' strategic and persuasive communication of themselves through personal branding, or branding the "Me Inc." (Peters, 1997, para. 5), has risen as a response to this increased scrutiny (e.g., Duffy & Pooley, 2019; Scolere, 2019). Personal branding refers to "a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based in a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery" (Gorbatov et al., 2018, para. 21). Echoing the trend of promotional culture (Wernick, 1988), this communicative practice typifies individuals' self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) and engagement in spectacle and performance (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998) for professional purposes in the social media environment. Through crafting the information presented online, this communicative action is in essence a strategic (one-way) consensual persuasion aiming to generate favorable decisions on recruitment from the employers (Bakir et al., 2019). To achieve this communicative objective, effective personal branding should be 1) strategic by intentionally and programmatically targeting at the potential employer, 2) positive through sufficient and directed branding, 3) differentiated through displaying unique attributes or characteristics which are desired by the targeted employer, and 4) artifactual through personalized narratives and imageries (Gorbatov et al., 2018, 2019).

Social media are especially popular among college students (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Higher education has recently been paying attention to training students' strategic and persuasive communication for career purposes on social media (e.g., Crook & Pastorek, 2015; Slone & Gaffney, 2016). Besides instructing students to use social media as a

professional communication instrument, instructors should also guide students to grasp the theoretical foundations underlying their communication practices. This classroom activity thus aims to help students master the concept of personal branding through instructing students to evaluate their communications on LinkedIn. It is suitable for higher-level communication-related courses covering digital communications, brand communication, or social media content creation. Students at this level already possess foundational knowledge of organizational culture, new media literacy, communication competency, and writing skills, which can facilitate instructors to launch this activity.

To achieve a better learning outcome, this activity adopts an experiential teaching method through a consequential cycle of hands-on experiences, reflective observation and discussion, abstract conceptualization, and proactive implementation and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). It facilitates students' reflection on their experiences of using social media, especially LinkedIn, and motivates them to make strategic adjustments to persuasive communications on social media for career initiation and advancement in the future.

The activity

Preparation

Two weeks before the activity, the instructor should ask students to create a LinkedIn account if they have not done so before. Students should also locate a desired job post through online sources and familiarize themselves with job descriptions and requirements. During the two weeks, students are encouraged to manage their LinkedIn profiles with their targeted job posts in mind. The instructor should also make accessible the key literature on personal branding (e.g., Gorbатов et al., 2018, 2019) and ask students to take notes on the key attributes of effective personal branding. The instructor should print out Table 1 twice the number of the whole class. Remind students to bring their digital devices that are connected to the internet to the activity.

Procedure

This activity lasts about two hours. The instructor should firstly deliver a brief introduction of the whole activity (five minutes). To warm students up, the instructor can then review the notion of personal branding and its key attributes with the entire class (10 minutes). Next, the instructor asks the students to form a group of two or three, followed by a sharing of their desired job posts with each other (10 minutes). Then the instructor distributes the printed document to all students. Students are asked to evaluate different components of their LinkedIn profile gauged by the categories of the notion of personal branding. Encourage students to take notes when finishing the evaluation about why they score their communications in the particular component in this way. This step helps students to theorize their communications on LinkedIn from the perspective of personal branding. After students complete the form, they are asked to switch to the evaluation of their partner's personal branding on LinkedIn with a new form. The evaluations usually take 30 minutes. After students finish their tasks, those in a group are instructed to compare with each other their scores and discuss the reasons behind the discrepancies, if there are any, with the aid of the notes.

Table 1. Key attributes of personal branding and categories, manifestations on LinkedIn, and evaluation scales (five-point Likert scale, 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree)

Key attributes and categories (Gorbatov et al., 2018, 2019)	Manifestation on LinkedIn (Babu, 2015; Slone & Gaffney, 2016)	Evaluation (Gorbatov et al., 2019)				
Strategic		1	2	3	4	5
1. I ensure that my online educational and professional profiles are complete and engaging.	1. Completing your LinkedIn profile using multimedia channels (e.g., photo, presentation, video, blog, article, etc.).					
2. I make an effort to expand my professional network.	2. Connecting with at least 50 people who are relevant to your career focus.					

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>3. I proactively adjust my professional image to manage expectations of the target audience.</p> <p>4. I purposefully engage in experiences that can enhance my professional image.</p> <p>5. I have established routines to communicate my professional image to my network.</p> | <p>3. Adjusting your descriptions in sections such as summary and work experience with key words and phrases in a targeted job description.</p> <p>4. Joining groups relevant to your targeted profession or industry and engaging in discussions.</p> <p>5. Updating your status professionally and strategically (e.g., sharing the article you just wrote) ideally once a week.</p> |
|--|--|

Total
score

Positive

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1. I consistently communicate that I deliver valuable work.</p> <p>2. I make my successes known to my professional network.</p> <p>3. I proactively seek others' endorsements to promote the quality of my work.</p> | <p>1. Consistently communicating your experience with descriptions of what you did (e.g., maintained office schedule and client booking), how well you did it (e.g., increased tickets sales by 20%), and who it impacted (e.g., mentored high school students aged 14–18).</p> <p>2. Highlighting your successes in sections such as status update, summary, and experience and requesting one recommendation per month relevant to your success (e.g., “Lea’s contributions on the project enabled us to increase forecasted savings by 5% over our original plan”).</p> <p>3. Seeking endorsements of skills made by your connections.</p> |
|---|---|

Total
score

Differentiated

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>I make an effort to have a distinct profile compared to my peers.</p> | <p>Communicating your unique qualifications (e.g., CPR certified), skills (e.g., speaking Mandarin), and experiences (e.g., volunteer for Dress for Success every weekend) in your summary, work experience, projects,</p> |
|--|--|
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languages, volunteer experience, and/or other sections.

Artifactual

I make sure that what I do is recognizable.

Personalizing your written and visual communications with the desired personalities injected.

Debriefing

Debriefing is a core element of an experiential learning process because it enhances students' self-awareness of their strengths and drawbacks regarding the lectured topic (Kolb, 1984). In the second hour, the instructor can lead a three-step discussion with the whole class using the "What?", "So What?", and "Now What?" pedagogical strategy (Schoel et al., 1988). Firstly, students are encouraged to answer the "What?" questions by reflecting upon what happened during the activity: (1) If your evaluation of your own personal branding in your LinkedIn profile is the same as those by your partner, what is the score? (2) If the evaluations are scored differently, what are the scores? Then the "So What?" questions are raised, which aims to dig out the reasons behind the discrepancies: (1) Why did you score the communications of certain aspects of the attributes and/or certain categories within each attribute higher for yourself than for your partner? (2) What about the lower ones? By connecting the experiential experience with future measures, the instructor guides students to answer the following "Now What?" question: How will you more effectively manage your personal branding on social media platforms in the future for career purposes, for example, securing an employment opportunity?

Students usually report discrepancies between the score for their own personal branding and those by their partners. When they interpret the reasons for the negative evaluations, they frequently mention the following aspects: failing to adequately present their qualities and characteristics (e.g., incomplete LinkedIn profile), to strike a balance between bragging and creating a reasonable expectation for the target audience, i.e. the recruiter, to be

proactive in engaging in professional activities such as group discussions, and to differentiate being unique from being quirky or obscure. In response, some students explain that one of the main reasons for these failures lies in the unawareness of their qualities and characteristics. The instructor can recommend students to solve this problem by using free online self-assessment tools, such as The Keirsey Temperament Sorter (<https://www.keirsey.com/>). Another major reason is that students fail to have a thorough and updated understanding of the expectations of the employers from the candidates. The instructor can direct students to research into the targeted companies' digital media presence. Remind students to adjust their communications according to the new requirements, such as being able to work remotely and having a sense of community in the context of the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic, from the employers.

Students also share good practices when evaluating their own and peer's personal branding practices. For example, students report positively about integrating the characteristics of the personal brander, such as humor and warm-heartedness, with personalized narratives and imageries. They also applaud sharing their creative digital media assignments, such as a podcast, on LinkedIn, which displays their unique ability in technology and content creation.

Students mention the importance of mastering the notion of personal branding since it can guide their persuasive communication practices across different social media platforms. For example, their tweets and Facebook status updates should also be strategic in adjusting the language and visual content to match the expectations of the potential employers. Seeking professionals' endorsements of their works through retweets and/or sharing on Facebook could also enhance the positive intentionality of personal branding. These insights shared during debriefing solidify students' learning of the notion of personal branding and its key

attributes and raise their awareness of better persuasive communication practices on social media platforms in the future.

Appraisal

This activity helps students master the notion of personal branding and its key attributes through evaluating their communications on LinkedIn using an experiential learning and teaching method. Overall, students respond proactively and positively to this activity. They find it extremely practical since it can help students to critically examine their communications on social media and strategically use social media platforms for professional purposes in the future. Students also respond that they become eager to learn more about personal branding from digital media content creation sessions. At the end of the sessions, the instructor can launch this activity again and encourage students to compare their performances.

As per students' suggestions, this activity can be enhanced by including different channels of measurement. One of the most convenient ways is to invite human resources professionals in the university's career and employability department to assess some of the student volunteers' social media presence, which can validate this classroom activity. Moreover, this activity can be developed jointly with other units in communication programs, such as Consumer and Stakeholder Insights in marketing communications. Students' exercise of prioritization of stakeholders can be integrated with this activity so that they can more accurately identify the target audiences and their demands in personal branding communications.

Readers may also find the following notes helpful. Firstly, students can easily be distracted by online content. Instructors may need to remind students of the time limit when running the activity. Secondly, instructors are encouraged to manage their own personal

brands on social media. They could use their branding as a case to share with students. It can effectively shorten the distance between instructors and students.

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