

Hinesight

The personal brand in futures

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Keywords

Brands, Personality, Marketing

Abstract

Considers branding more in line with bringing forth self-knowledge and self-expression than the creation of a cultivated or false self. It's not about selling "new and improved" futures tools. Rather, it's about discovering the inner and authentic you and proclaiming it to your clients. The personal brand is about recognizing who you are and what you do best, and communicating that to clients.

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"Now he's really sold out. Branding? Futures? And coming from someone once condemning the cult of personality in futures. What's going on here?" Perhaps the title of this piece triggered this or a similar reaction. Understandable, but allow me to explain.

Let's think of branding more in line with bringing forth self-knowledge and self-expression than the creation of a cultivated or false self. It's not about selling "new and improved" futures tools. Rather, it's about discovering the inner and authentic you and proclaiming it to your clients. "Yikes", you say, "I don't want to go there." I'm suggesting, however, that the last frontier is the journey inside, and that we must not only make this journey, but also integrate into our practice, to be more effective futurists.

Let's look more closely at the connection between branding and futures work. Unfortunately, this will not take very long, since there has been almost no branding in the futures field. Global Business Network (GBN) comes to mind as a firm that seems to have consciously created a brand along the lines of hanging out with and learning from their remarkable people. After that, however . . . you could say that the Institute for Alternative Futures has a strong brand in the health care arena. The old Futures Group had some name recognition, but they're no longer with us. It seems there is a feeling or prejudice against branding as something appropriate to cereal or consumer packaged goods, but beneath high-minded futures work.

My initial thinking on this topic was stimulated by none other than management guru Tom Peters, when he wrote *The Brand Called You* for Fast Company. Whatever we think of Peters and the pop management genre, we can extract some valuable lessons from those who have earned mass appeal. I can still clearly see Peters furiously pacing the room at a Fast Company conference talking about his piece – exhorting, falling silent, questioning, laughing, being close to tears. This was not the cold, calculating analyst I expected to see. Rather I felt I'd encountered someone who cared deeply about what he was doing and embodied his message. It was the brand called Tom, and I was hooked.

Now this doesn't mean that we all copy Peters' style, or toss out our principles and become salespeople. Rather, it's about not being afraid to reveal something of the messenger behind the message. In our world of information overload, a couple of the key criteria people are using to make hard choices are trust and authenticity. There are lots of consultants who can carry out solid analysis. But there aren't many who can make the connection and earn the trust of clients to the



degree that a really deep insight is reached and acted on.

Futurists have often naively assumed that the “rightness” and usefulness of our message ought to be good enough to attract clients (by “client” I’m referring to any potential consumer of or participant in futures work). And *mea culpa*, too. In this column, I’ve preached less reliance on personality and more on methods. My concern with the cult of personality in futures has been an over-reliance on genius forecasting – “listen to me because I’m a genius”, rather than because of the methods used. My revised stance is to suggest that our personal brand include a balance between our personality and our tools.

The initial Peters’ branding insights kind of swirled around my brain until a visit to the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI), where the professor and students were proclaiming the importance of the mindset of the environmental scanner. They make the bold statement about “the role of the scanner being front and center.” This is part of their attempt to move the field beyond excessive reliance on empirical methods.

What AFI is saying out loud is that we are not separate from our biases. This fits with what I was taught at the University of Houston – Clear Lake futures program as well, but there we identified our bias primarily to work around it. It’s like the ugly monster in the closet that we must acknowledge, but we want to get it back into the closet as soon as possible. The new approach says that your biases are part of you, you are the brand, and in effect it’s a package deal – what you see is what you get. So instead of acknowledging our bias only to remove it from our work, we integrate it into our work as appropriate.

This is really suggesting simple positioning. Because we’ve tended to be super-sensitive about not including any biases, we have in many cases gone to the opposite pole and tried to deliver “objective” analysis. This leaves potential clients with the conundrum of trying to figure out which objective analyst to hire. There’s not a lot of differentiation to help them choose. The personal brand is about recognizing who you are and what you do best, and communicating that to clients.

A good brand is about trust. The consumer of the brand participates in its creation. They know that brand x is about y, and if they transact with brand x, they trust they will get y. A brand is a promise and the more you deliver on the promise,

the more you strengthen the brand. Have we really thought about the promise we offer to our clients? In the Association of Professional Futurist’s “futures of futures” scenario salon in 2002, one of the key issues raised was “are we connecting to our clients’ ‘searing pain?’”

An important benefit of branding is to distinguish your offering from others in a crowded marketplace. Here we face the challenge that mainstream consulting firms are working their way into our tool kits. Overall, this is a good thing, as the ideas and tools of futures are being disseminated. Rather than try to defend against this incursion, the strategy ought to be to innovate – to emphasize what we do better than the mainstream consultants. The argument here, of course, is that our uniqueness as futurists – in the way we think and approach challenges – is what’s different. So, we need to express that uniqueness, thus the personal brand.

This brings us back to the personal and prominent role of the futurist. What is different about us? Let’s not over-think this. We see the world differently to most. This, more than perhaps anything else, is our distinct competitive advantage. We’re not necessarily better analysts, but we can see patterns where others see chaos, and we can see connections where others see confusion. We’re typically born this way, and it’s how we end up in this line of work.

Our tools, concepts, and methods are part of the package, but perhaps they are the cart and we are the horse. I think putting our tool kit forth as our brand promise isn’t enough. The brand promise is our unique integration of practitioner and tools. We need to become “one with our tools”. We are chefs, rather than recipe-following cooks. Tools are our servants, and we are not tool-specific. We have access to a wide variety of tools that we call on depending on the situation.

How will this personal brand manifest itself? It’s probably easier with clients you already have, who have come to know you and have come back to get more. But how to use this to attract new clients? “Hello, here is my profile. I’m an INTP, KAI 140, HBDI 2211, and yellow in the spiral”. Should we each have a brand statement? Should we each have a personal manifesto? So, what’s suggested here is that we do away with the fiction that futures is an impersonal enterprise. Take it personally, and embody it in your personal brand.