

Jumping on the brandwagon

Skills and qualifications can only get you so far in the marketplace. If you really want to stand out from the crowd, it pays to consider your personal branding

When stock markets around the world dived, the strongest brands maintained their value, even thrived. Think of Apple, Google and Amazon. All strong, globally recognised brands that not only helped to protect their businesses from the worst of the downturn, but put them in a position for growth in the upturn.

Entire corporations have risen and

qualifications required to do the job, but so do many others. So what differentiates you from the rest? This is where your own “brand” comes in.’ In other words, we need to have something else to lift us above the crowd if we want to progress – and that something is our ‘personal brand’.

While a brand is something we traditionally associate with a product

career is ‘absolutely key’, says personal branding coach Pippa Rees. ‘Those people who actively think about the way they walk, talk, behave and visually present themselves are going to be noticed,’ she says. ‘An employee of an organisation needs to underpin the brand of that business and represent it, so you need to align your own brand values with those of the company so that you embody what the brand stands for and, ultimately, will be an ambassador for your company.’

However, Rees warns that it’s no use simply trying to create an image and reputation that doesn’t align with your own personal values in order to fit with the organisation’s brand. ‘It’s very difficult pretending to be something you’re not,’ she says. ‘If you don’t stay true to your own personal values, then – even in a subtle, subconscious way – your body language will give you away. We’ve all spent time with people we don’t quite “get”, probably because they’re trying to be somebody that they’re not, so we don’t trust them.’

It is this trust, says David Royston-Lee, business psychologist and co-author of *Brand You: Turn Your Unique Talents Into A Winning Formula*, that is so vital for accountants to build strong personal brands to ensure success – especially at the higher levels in a company. ‘A partner or director is dealing with senior management and clients, and how are they going to trust you if you don’t seem authentic, if you are simply doing a job and nothing more?’ he asks. ‘You’ve got to be more interested in the client, more interested in their products or services; you’ve got to be thinking about how you can help them and it might have nothing to do with accountancy at all.’

People power

Gone are the days that partners and



‘YOUR BRAND IS WHAT PEOPLE SAY ABOUT YOU WHEN YOU ARE NOT IN THE ROOM’

fallen on the strength of their brands. However, in the last few years, the concept of a brand has increasingly been applied to people. With economic recovery hopefully on the way, many accountants will be looking for new jobs or pushing for promotion, looking to impress hirers with their knowledge and skills. But that’s no longer good enough, says Susan Croft, public relations specialist and director of ASC Training and Consulting.

‘The accountancy and finance professions are highly competitive,’ she notes. ‘You might have all the skills and

or company, we all have one, says Lesley Everett, personal branding expert and director of Walking TALL International. ‘Whether you’ve thought about it or not, your personal brand is there already,’ she says. ‘It’s that collection of powerful and clear ideas that people have about you when they think of you, when they describe you, when they choose to recommend or market you to others. People need to be able to easily describe what you do and what you stand for.’

Building and managing your personal brand at each stage of your



A young boy showed his enthusiasm for Apple computers by shaving the Apple logo into his hair for the occasion of the grand opening of Apple's new flagship store in New York

of meeting you. 'Even though dress codes are becoming more relaxed, we still expect our professionally qualified people to look professional – you need to respect the environment you're in,' she says. 'Clients really want to trust that person – if they're sloppy in the way they dress, clients will wonder if their work is going to be sloppy.'

You also need to examine your talents, values and purpose, says Royston-Lee: 'You need to answer the question "who am I?" and the easiest way is to start examining your talents – talents more so than skills, as skills can be learned,' he says. 'Your talents allow you to stand out. Then identify your values and purpose, which will give you a sense of what your authentic brand is.'

Body language and tone of voice are also important, says Everett, as well as being interested and visible. 'People love you to be interested in them and remember details about them – we live in such a busy world that these little things make a huge difference. They can also make you more visible – and you really do need to be visible in your target market,' she adds.

Last, but not least, is consistency. 'You need to be consistent in what you're offering,' says Croft, 'and in the messages you give off about yourself. A brand has the ability to deliver on a promise, to deliver on its values, so it has to be consistent.'

In summary, a strong, consistent personal brand is vital for any accountant's career or business. As Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, once said: 'Your brand is what people say about you when you are not in the room.' We simply need to make sure it is what we would want them to say.

Santhie Goundar, accountant and journalist

* FIVE TIPS TO BOOST YOUR BRAND

- 1 If you dress sloppily clients will think your work is sloppy
- 2 Examine your talents, values and purpose
- 3 Be aware of your body language and tone of voice
- 4 Always be interested in other people and be visible
- 5 Be consistent in what you are offering

directors can hide behind the brand of their company or firm, says Everett. 'While a well-established name is one thing, it's the people who are really going to make the difference,' she says. 'In accountancy, clients have really got to feel, especially in the economic climate we have had, that we can trust that individual. While it helps when a firm's solid brand message is there to make sure they're the firm a client

feels they could work with, it's the personality, communication, attitude and behaviour of the individual they will want to work with.'

So what can ambitious individuals do to ensure they send out the right messages to employers and clients? First of all, says Rees, take care in the way you present yourself: research has shown that people will decide their opinion of you in the first ten seconds