



Personal Branding: Leveraging Disability as a "Can Do"

A personal brand is a marketing tool that sends a message about strengths and values. For people with disabilities, it also defines their "can do" abilities.

Developing a personal brand is a journey in which a person defines their qualities, values, and abilities they apply in personal and work lives. For people with disabilities, the personal brand also sends a powerful "can do" statement. This is critically important to changing a culture that continues to look at people with disabilities in terms of limitations rather than capabilities. A carefully cultivated personal brand changes that perspective by bundling together the personal skills, attributes, traits, values, and other characteristics that make a person unique. It is an excellent marketing strategy for people with disabilities who are seeking employment or corporate contracts and must get past the invisible barrier of bias.

Defining Self

A strong personal brand serves the same purpose as a corporate brand in that it is designed to differentiate a person and to stand out from the competition. In the case of people with disabilities, the "competition" consists of people without disabilities and workplace bias. Despite the focus on diversity and inclusion that so many companies claim, people with disabilities continue to struggle to overcome the perspective they are "not able," too limited, or too expensive to hire because of needed accommodations. Even some entrepreneurs with disabilities must contend with bias. Personal branding offers a powerful means of redefining self to deliver a convincing message of values and attributes to overcome the incorrect perceptions of others.

Developing a personal brand begins with defining self in a few sentences, focusing on positive attributes and creating a theme of ability. What values can the person deliver on a consistent basis? What does the disabled person have to offer personal and business relationships? The personal brand may be a marketing tool, but it is not self-promotion. It is how a person relates to others. A person with a disability wants an individual they are interacting with to see him or her as more capable and stronger because of the disability. This leverages disability as a characteristic that adds to the sum of the person's life experiences, rather than subtracting from abilities.

What Does a Person Stand For?

When an employer or procurement professional meets a person with a disability, it is quite likely impressions are quickly formed. It is safe to say that most corporate individuals (and many other people) bring biases or preconceived ideas to interactions with the disabled. The recruiter decides in advance the person will have too much trouble connecting with coworkers or will have too many medical issues. Since people always form impressions, an individual with a disability may have developed a reputation that is based on faulty impressions. For example, the job seeker has held only low level positions because of employer bias but is highly capable of assuming a leadership role. The gap between the reputation, or how others have perceived a person, and reality can be closed with a solid personal brand.



In this case, the personal brand should be framed in terms of what the person is capable of accomplishing. What qualities does the person have that make him or her a leader who can deliver results? A positive personal brand conveys messages of strength like the ability to get things done, successfully develop and maintain relationships, overcome barriers to success and motivate others. For people with disabilities, it means embracing the disability as an experience that has given the person certain qualities and competencies, like a higher level of emotional intelligence, a determination to succeed at whatever is attempted, and an ability to form relationships with people in general that are not built on biases. In a world where bias drives so many decisions, the personal branding becomes empowering.

Living a Personal Brand

Living a personal brand means applying the values in every situation. For example, a person with disabilities may have faced biases that led to underemployment, but it is how the person handled the jobs that demonstrates personal branding to potential employers, or if a supplier, to corporate customers. Martin Luther King instinctively understood the power of personal branding, even if he did specifically use the term. He said, "If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well'."

People with disabilities are understandably frustrated with the employment market. The 2016 unemployment rate of 10.5 percent rate compared to the 4.6 percent rate for 2016 is proof that people with disabilities who are available for employment are having significant difficulties getting jobs. June 2017, U.S. labor force statistics proved again that people with disabilities continue to struggle for equality. People with disabilities are more likely to be employed part-time and less likely to work in management and professional occupations. Overcoming this challenge will take a two-pronged approach. Employers must explore and overcome biases in the workforce, and people with disabilities need to develop a personal brand.

People strengthen their personal brand in many ways, including using social media as a means of expressing the values and to reframe self, if past biases have someone held back someone from fulfilling their promise. Brands constantly evolve, but always remain authentic. Living the brand means creating the desired impact on people, whether its peers, coworkers, social media followers, or employers. It is not acting a part, which some people with disabilities do in the belief it makes them fit in better. For example, a person with a disability will try to hide the disability to overcome bias in the workplace or to be viewed as "normal" by others. Living a brand is about being natural, embracing the real self, and maintaining values in everything said and done. It is true – developing a personal brand requires consistent effort. However, it is effort that will pave the way for the person with a disability and for people with disabilities who want equal opportunities.