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# THE ART OF AUTHENTIC PERSONAL BRANDING

Do you know this woman? She could be working in your office. She could be your college roommate. Or she could be living in your body. She's someone who feels she needs to make a change. She doesn't lack talent or a work ethic, but her life and career don't seem to be on the right track. And she's afraid the train might derail completely. Or maybe she'll just get off the train and walk home.

She knows her workplace has modern attitudes. But something is still wrong. She's unsure of herself. She's not living up to her potential. She's trying to "lean in" and advocate for herself but she's not sure how to do it without being too aggressive.

She's suffering from a problem that affects only women: Female Behavior Confusion Disorder (FBCD).

## **Too Hot? Too Cold?**

What's a woman to do? How do you get it right in the workplace?

Your instincts tell you to "be nice," but if you're too nice you are viewed as weak and not taken seriously. If you are too assertive and exhibit the same leadership qualities that are praised in a man, you

risk being called that familiar epithet referring to a female dog that, curiously, has no male equivalent.

It's the Goldilocks dilemma. If you're too hot, you're branded as aggressive or even out of control. If you're too cold, you're labeled an ice queen. The same behavior that's acceptable or admired in a man is often criticized in a woman. It's hard to get it just right.

Even Catalyst, the research organization that's been studying women's leadership and the workplace for more than fifty years isn't sure. But it is sure that a key reason we don't see more women at the higher levels in business is not because of a talent gap but because a self-promotion gap.

### **The Male Hubris Effect versus the Female Humility Effect**

We women have some catching up to do. We're not as good at personal branding as men are. Why is that?

One example of this disparity can be found in the personal columns. The men all sound like Brad Pitt, except even better looking and more accomplished. And what about the women? Well, the women like long walks in the country. (Not exactly the hard sell.) Ladies, that's branding for staying single. If you ask those Brad Pitts what they are looking for in a woman, this long walk thing is not very high on the list. In fact, it's not even on the list.

One male social scientist who did a major global study of male and female business leadership found men are so good at promoting their abilities, they often—believe it or not—exaggerate their abilities and their I.Q., what he branded “The Male Hubris Effect.”

Women, on the other hand, tend to lowball their abilities and I.Q., what he dubbed “The Female Humility Effect.” The Hubris/Humility Effect shows up in different industries and in different countries. Women judge their abilities worse than they actually are and men judge their abilities as better than they are.

### **Humility's a Virtue, but Self-Promotion Pays**

“Gena” is an ambitious, hardworking executive. In the morning she would often go into work very early and sometimes the CEO would pop in the elevator with her.

Gena was scared to talk. But she was also scared not to talk. So she would talk about the weather.

As she was introduced to the concept of personal branding, Gena started paying more attention to business dynamics and her performance. Then, lo and behold, she found herself in the dreaded elevator with the CEO again. This time a male colleague, Bob, walked in, turned to the CEO, and jauntily said, “John, great to run into you. I’m Bob Smith from sales on the ABC product team. You’ll be glad to know that we had a great meeting with a new client this week and we just sealed the deal.”

The beaming CEO said, “Bob, you just made my day.” And the CEO didn’t stop with the proverbial pat on the back, he actually patted Bob on the back as he was getting out of the elevator.

Now, Gena was already learning about personal branding strategies, but there’s nothing like a little reality show to convince people to take action. Gena felt like she had been slapped in the face with a fish. Later, in my office, she became reflective.

“Catherine, I saw firsthand what you’re talking about. Bob is branding himself as the next VP, and what am I doing? I’m branding myself as the weather girl.”

Bingo. Not knowing how to brand ourselves—it’s a woman’s dilemma. Business has its unspoken rules and procedures that men seem to know well. Winning is the objective, and to win men leverage typically male aptitudes like assertiveness, personal promotion, and confidence. Indeed, these are the signs of leadership.

As Gena told me, her messages growing up were to get along rather than compete, work hard and your work will be rewarded, and don’t try to get noticed. Gena got on the personal branding bandwagon and eventually she was recommended by the CEO as a high-potential employee and put on the fast track.

Later, Gena was chosen to run a large division in the Midwest. She told me that becoming a woman who brands was the single most important reason for her success. She overcame her fear of talking to the CEO and other key executives and learned how to authentically promote herself. As she got to know John, the CEO, she discovered that he hated getting into the elevator with employees, because almost everyone froze the minute he stepped in!

## Judge a Book by Its Cover

As it did with Gena, branding can make the difference between success and mediocrity. If you don't think branding is important, look at this example from the commercial world: a diet book first published more than fifteen years ago was called *The Modified Carbohydrate Diet*.

Did you ever hear of this diet? Probably not. That sizzling title was created by a Miami doctor. Of course, we're always told, "Don't judge a book by its cover," but we do it every day. Unbranded, the Miami doctor's book didn't do well, selling only a few thousand copies. But so many clients loved the diet that it was passed along through word of mouth.

Then it was branded.

Enter *The South Beach Diet*.

Now the diet had a brand identity that had sizzle. The new name conjured up an image of beautiful people, exciting lifestyles, and the newest happening place. Here was something we like and something we'd like to be part of. The book's cover featured palm trees and Art Deco colors like those found in South Beach. It had a different look—other diet books at the time looked like textbooks. The new brand appealed to people's perceptions. If you like South Beach, you might like the South Beach diet. Nobody really likes modified carbohydrates.

The book got a free celebrity endorsement when a reporter asked then-President Bill Clinton how he lost weight, and he said he went on the South Beach Diet. (Isn't that just like him?) *The South Beach Diet* was one of the first books to capitalize on Internet forums to create an online community of dieters who could further promote the book. So here it is. Smart branding and marketing made this modified carbohydrate diet book a colossal success. These same principles can be key in accomplishing your personal branding.

## Hard Power versus Soft Power

Today, for companies and for people, what matters is not "hard power" but "soft power," or branding power, the intangible assets that means so much. It's the soft things that attract people to your brand.

For people, "hard power" is the tangible things you can put on your résumé like years of experience, job history, skills, education, and the

like. Hard assets are important but are not enough to compete successfully in today's ultracompetitive environment. We all know lots of people with hard power assets who are underemployed or even unemployed.

For people, soft power, or branding power, is your image and reputation, your network and alliances, your visibility, your communications ability, and the ideas and intellectual property associated with you. Soft power is your emotional connection with your "customers," and we've all got customers. (Your "customers" may be your boss, other executives, and colleagues—a customer is anyone who can affect your brand.)

Soft power is the belief system people have about you. It's standing for something that is valuable in the marketplace. It's having a game plan for success. The fact is, like it or not, branding rules!

So, what is branding, really?

### **Attach an Idea to Yourself**

At its core, branding is about attaching an idea to a product, or an idea to yourself.

You need to attach an idea that's *authentic*, that's based on who you are and your unique strengths and preferences. When you copy, you'll always be second rate.

You also want to find a *different* idea for your brand. Brand managers spend a lot of time delineating differences: a different benefit, different look, different target audience, different process or materials, a different something. In a school of gold fish, you want to be a silver fish.

Your personal brand idea also has to be *relevant*. It has to be something that people value in the arena where you work. For example, my brand idea is that I am a personal brand strategist, not a career or business coach, as many others position themselves. A brand strategist is someone who applies the principles and strategies from the commercial world of brands to your most important product—Brand You.

### **Becoming a Woman Who Brands**

Let's look at personal branding in action. "Liz" had worked at a global company for ten years. She had a large staff but had not been promoted like some other colleagues. Liz had the staff and responsibilities but

not the title and compensation. She felt stuck, a common situation for women. Her goal was to have a leadership role and be an officer of the company.

So what was Liz's game plan to achieve her goal?

When I met with Liz, she was upset with her boss, understandably, since she had just been passed over for a promotion yet again. She was so frustrated that she communicated mainly by memo and e-mail. In staff meetings, she sat far from her boss. She let emotions rule.

Let's analyze this. What reaction did Liz want to get from her boss? Liz's goal was to get promoted, to get a better title and more money. Yet, what was she doing to get that reaction? She was avoiding her boss. Is that a good strategy for achieving her goal?"

### **Don't Let Emotions Trump Strategy**

Reacting emotionally in business is a mistake women tend to make. I, too, have often had to fight the "I'm outta here" reaction when I feel someone has done me wrong in business. But reacting emotionally and taking flight are mistakes that women are hardwired to make more often. In my years on Wall Street, I'd see men have a big fight and be best buddies again the next day. Early in my career I was guilty of the opposite, vowing not to speak to the people I was mad at for the rest of my life. Which is the better way to react, from a career perspective?

In my coaching with Liz, I inquired, "What did your boss say when you pitched yourself for a promotion and outlined all your accomplishments over the last two years?"

Liz looked at me in stunned silence. "I didn't ask him," she said. "I didn't pitch myself. He should know what I've done with my team over the last two years. It's been awesome."

This is another dilemma peculiar to women. Women don't ask.

### **The Power of a Third-Party Endorsement**

As I got to know Liz, she told me about an internal position she had applied for the previous year. She had great interviews with a committee of five executives, and Liz felt her credentials were perfect for the role. Liz was upset when she didn't get the position. Later, she found out that the winning candidate, James, hadn't just interviewed with

the committee, he reached out to other executives and asked them to advocate for him with committee members they knew. And all these “sponsors,” or what we call third-party endorsements or testimonials, turned the contest in James’s favor.

So I said to Liz, “Do you know people who you could have called to endorse you?” “Only a few,” she admitted. Then Liz said something interesting, “I don’t think it’s fair. It should just be about your experience, not how good a networker you are.”

Of course it’s fair; that’s the way the business world works.



*If you say it, it’s bragging.  
If others say it, it’s an expert opinion.*



Third-party endorsements from satisfied customers, experts, or well-known people are powerful in the branding world because they work. Let other people brag for you, too.

## **It’s Not School Rules Anymore**

An important thing for women to realize is that the business world doesn’t operate on “School Rules.” School rewards studying, completing assignments, and not being disruptive. There is more transparency and reward for industriousness and the only-answer-when-you’re-called-on good girl grind.

The business world operates under more fluid rules, under which personal promotion, assertiveness, and getting your work in front of the right people are critical to success. The very traits that make women great students often work against them in the business world. We’re waiting to be recognized for all our good work rather than promoting our abilities and pitching ourselves for plum assignments.

So while women outperform men in colleges and graduate schools in terms of GPA and graduation rates, they start to fall behind almost from the moment they enter the workforce. Men are eight times as likely to negotiate their first salary. By the time women reach the mid level in their companies, they feel stuck, and frustration sets in.

## What Got You Here, Won't Get You There

Your intelligence and industriousness will get you to the mid level, but you need a whole different set of skills—personal branding skills—if you want to be promoted and perceived as a leader. An important thing to realize is that if you don't take charge of your personal brand, other people will. And they're not likely to brand you in the way you want to be branded.

As smart and hardworking as Liz was, she was holding herself back in ways both large and small by not branding herself. For starters, Liz needed to own her value and be able to pitch herself for a promotion in an elevator speech. We did a “brand audit,” looking at Liz's strengths and weaknesses. She was a leader who nurtured her team and led them well in executing projects. So the brand idea we had for positioning Liz was “the empowering leader who gets results,” to emphasize that she was a strong leader who people liked working for and who was able to execute large projects successfully.

Her boss, Liz confided, had once told her offhandedly that she “lacked visibility in the company.” She was the invisible leader: very task oriented, mainly in her office, not out and about that much.

In branding, visibility is important. That's why brands spend millions of dollars on advertising and PR. There is a visibility premium: if something is visible and well known, we think it is better than something that is invisible and unknown. It must be good, or it wouldn't be so famous, is how the thinking goes.

In business, visibility has a halo effect too. If you're more well known throughout the company, people will assume you're better than someone who is not known. Women can be visibility challenged, focusing on work and not doing the networking and promoting their visibility the way guys do. Liz's boss could even have suggested her for a promotion, and other senior executives may have said, “Liz who?” The assumption often is, if she is so good, I would have heard of her.

Liz also had to start managing up and sideways, building relationships not only with her boss but with other key executives and colleagues, not just managing her team. The upward people are the ones who decide. Having a team who loves you is not enough. Your boss, other executives, and colleagues are important customers for Brand You.



Plus, Liz needed to promote herself and her accomplishments. After all, if no one knows you and your accomplishments, they don't count. It's your job to make them known, not your boss's or other people's jobs to discover them.

### **All the World's a Meeting**

In the business world, the conference room is the stage for Brand You. If you're weak in meetings, you won't appear to be right for the management brand. Liz tended to speak mainly when asked a question at meetings. Her presentations contained lots of detailed bullet points recited in a monotone. When you perform poorly in meetings, you don't appear confident or, even worse, people might think you're lacking in ideas.

Turns out that Liz had an inner critic (The Voice) that second-guessed her and undermined her confidence. It was an inner voice that said, "Be careful what you say, it might be a dumb idea." The inner critic can be a problem particularly with high-achieving women. Fear is what feeds the inner critic: fear of not being good enough, fear of overreaching, fear of not being liked. I've had to fight The Voice, too, and replace negative messages with positive self-talk so that I could be myself and participate fully in business conversations.

### **Rebranding Takes Action**

The number-one market for Liz to target was her boss. Rather than avoid him, she needed to increase her face time by stopping by to chat and connecting in one-on-one meetings. Eventually, she would need to make an effective pitch for a promotion. (If these tactics didn't work, Plan B was to find a new position.)

An important concern was building visibility and relationships with a wider group of executives. One of her strategies was to invite colleagues to speak to her team at a monthly "Lunch and Learn." It was valuable for her team to learn about other business areas, but it was even more valuable to Liz for the business contacts.

To tackle her meeting and presenting phobias, Liz joined Toast Masters and took courses on presentation skills. At first, she didn't feel self-confident, so she had to "fake it until you make it" until she found her voice, her power, and her style. She became a woman who brands.

## You're Not a Man

The conventional wisdom has been that women have trouble succeeding because they don't act like men, the top-selling brand in the career marketplace. So the advice we've been given is to try to act like men. We took courses and tried to be more assertive. In the past, we were even encouraged to "dress for success," which meant dressing like a man, so we turned to dark, skirted suits with shoulder pads, briefcases, and tie-like scarves. Or we tried to adopt the male command-and-control model. Or we tried to model ourselves after male leaders in our company.

If that's the conventional wisdom, it's wrong. Playing it like a man doesn't work. Acting like a man brands you as tough and aggressive. When women adopt attitudes such as forcefulness and assertiveness, we can be lambasted as "too tough" and "unfeminine."

I remember a certain female executive back when I first worked on Wall Street. We'll call her "Alex." She was smart and got the job done, and done well. But her ideas on team building and compassion came right out of Joseph Stalin's playbook. Alex played the tough guy so well, you could imagine her as a fire-eater in the circus. She behaved like a bully and everyone was afraid of her, even her own staff. Alex represented what I hoped was a dying breed, a type not much discussed in women's leadership circles—the tough, successful female who is mean to other women and tries to sabotage them.

One day she called me to complain about a member of my staff, "Sophia," who had the audacity to disagree with the recommendation one of Alex's people had made in a meeting. And Alex complained to me about it in typical Alex fashion. "Tell your person if she does it again, I'll break her [expletive deleted] kneecaps."

Ouch! I didn't pass along Alex's stupid threat but counseled Sophia to always use all the diplomatic skills she could muster when talking with Alex or anyone on Alex's staff.



*Bad behavior is disliked in a man.  
But it's despised in a woman.*



This sort of behavior is counterproductive and ultimately destructive. A few years later, as usually happens, Alex had a big project that blew up. She needed some supporters to rally around her and maybe put the blowup in perspective. Unfortunately for her, but fortunately for the company and everyone else, Alex had no supporters and left the firm. The reign of terror was over, and we all gave a big sigh of relief. Her bad reputation was so well known in the industry that she was never able to land a big job again.

### **Be Who You Are—A Woman**

Trying to act like a man is stupid for the most basic reason. We're not men! And that's an advantage!

It's common sense to be authentic, and it's smart branding. Great commercial brands are always built on authenticity and on a brand's inherent strengths, and it's the same with you. Your brand must come from who you are, what makes you tick, what your passions are, and what your strengths are, even what your biology dictates. Confidence comes from being comfortable in your own skin.

You'll avoid the stress of trying to be something you're not and constantly attempting to fix your shortcomings. You'll be worth more as well.

The choice is between increasing results using your aptitudes and assets or making minor improvements to weak areas that will probably never be a major strength. Your house of cards may eventually collapse around you. Don't shortchange your assets and your power.

### **Nurture What You Want to Grow**

So many things shape us—our family and friends, the education we receive, and the times we grow up in, along with our biology, our evolutionary history, and our genes.

The interesting thing is that what we nurture is what grows in us. And neuroscientists are proving it. Scientists talk of “neuroplasticity”—how what we experience and focus on can actually “sculpt” the shape, size, and number of neurons, even the thickness of the connections between them. It's like Mom always said: “Use it or lose it.”

Many of us begin with great callings and then move on to duties and demands. But often we're great at managing priorities—at least, everyone's priorities but our own.

We need to put ourselves and our career success back into the equation. We need to leverage our personal strengths and our aptitudes as women. It's not helpful to blame the old boys' network or the glass ceiling. We need to focus on what we can control and on our best assets—our personal strengths and the aptitudes we're wired for as women.

The goal is to be ourselves, have fun, and succeed, and maybe even make the world a little better place.

We can't do these things unless we learn how to brand ourselves authentically. The most important asset you have is you. It's something that no one can take away from you. Your brand is your best self. Give it all the best things you want to be known for. You'll find that knowing your value is empowering personally, and others will perceive you differently. When you take charge of your career destiny, you'll be able to harness all the parts of yourself that contribute to your business success. You'll become a Woman Who Brands.



## **A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN THE HOUSE (AND IN THE SENATE)**

**Kirsten Gillibrand**  
U.S. Senate, New York

Being elected to the United States House of Representatives and later being elected to the U.S. Senate have been unparalleled honors. I had long dreamed of doing public service, but to represent our New York families in Congress has been more exciting and more rewarding than I could have ever imagined.

My story began long before I was born, with a family of strong, accomplished women who would be my inspiration. Many today still think of women in government as unusual, but in my grandmother's time it was virtually unheard of. In a time when the ink was barely dry on the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote, my grandmother was involved in politics and advocated that women's voices be heard.

Starting in the late 1930s, my grandmother Dorothea "Polly" McLean Noonan was a secretary in the New York State Legislature in Albany. At the time, all the secretaries were women and nearly all of the legislators were men. My grandmother wanted to be involved not only in legislation and government but in the politics of the day.

She believed women should have a stronger voice in who represented them and their families, so she began to organize at the grassroots level. She helped lead the effort to organize the women of the legislature and then broadened the network of women to form the first Women's Democratic Club in the county of Albany.

My grandmother taught me the importance of broad-based activism. I watched her engage women at every level of the political process, from going door to door, staffing phone banks, and stuffing envelopes to encouraging them to be stronger advocates. Because of her commitment and leadership, women's voices were heard, and they made a difference in the agenda of the day.

One of the greatest gifts my grandmother gave me was simply taking me with her. I remember many fall afternoons as a young girl passing out flyers, putting bumper stickers on cars, and sitting in campaign headquarters stuffing envelopes in the company of many fascinating women.

I had another strong role model—my mother, Polly Noonan Rutnik. She also was a trailblazer and set out to make a difference as a lawyer when few women chose such a profession. She was one of only three women in her law school class, and her experiences were pretty shocking. She had a criminal law exam scheduled for the day she went into labor with my older brother. Being progressive, her law professor was gracious enough to let her take the exam the next day!

As an attorney, my mom became an advocate for families adopting children, buying their first homes, and drawing up wills. I became a lawyer because I wanted to learn how to be the strongest and most effective advocate I could be.

As a young lawyer, I soon became interested in getting involved politically. I followed in my grandmother's footsteps and began to organize women. I became involved in the Women's Leadership Forum, a national organization founded to engage women in presidential politics.

There were very few women under the age of forty involved, so I set out to change that. I founded a local Women's Leadership Forum network. We taught younger women how to organize, raise money, and be more effective issues advocates. I began to think about doing public service full-time but did not really know how to make that transition.

One day, I was at a Women's Leadership Forum event and Andrew Cuomo, secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), was giving a speech about the importance of public service. After his talk, I approached him, introduced myself, and told him about my interest in serving, and he asked me to come to Washington to interview for a position as special counsel. After the interview, Mr. Cuomo offered me the job, and I accepted.


As special counsel at HUD, I was able to work on legislation that I thought mattered—such as the New Markets Initiative, intended to invest public and private money in low-income areas to build infrastructure and affordable homes. But mostly, it solidified my interest in doing public service full-time. Over the next few years, I thought about where I could best serve and decided that my training would lend itself best to serving at the federal level as a member of Congress.

In the meantime, my husband and I decided to raise our family where I had grown up, near my parents, brother's family, aunts, uncles, and cousins, in upstate New York. Once upstate, we decided that it was time to try to make that shift to full-time public service. I ran for the U.S. Congress representing the 20th District of New York.

I was privileged to win the seat and the great honor of representing more than 600,000 upstate New Yorkers in Washington. In 2009, I was appointed by Governor Paterson to fill the U.S. Senate seat formerly held by Hillary Clinton, and was elected in a special election for the seat held in 2010. I stay in touch with my constituents by holding town hall "Congress on your Corner" meetings at grocery stores, coffee shops, bookstores, and community centers, where I talk to folks about the issues that matter to them. I usually learn a tremendous amount and often get the best ideas for legislation directly from my constituents at these gatherings.

I hope to be a role model for young women, as my mother and grandmother were for me. I hope we will see more women in local and national office because they can see it is possible. I know my grandmother would be proud of me and of all the women who work every day to provide for their families and make a difference in their own special way.





**Women who brand know  
that if you don't brand yourself,  
someone else will, and it won't be *your* brand.**