

Harness the Power of Branding

Eric Petersen, Librarian
H&R Block Business & Career Center
Kansas City Public Library

You're seeking a position as a business librarian, and see an exciting job posting. You also look at the library's webpage, and read any articles or online information about the library to get a feel for its direction and culture. Usually insights on culture aren't gleaned from this kind of searching, though. You have to work there to pick up on it. Culture is important not just for the obvious reason - Will you personally fit in among your coworkers? If the library is in a major transition period, the changes may alter the work culture because of shifting responsibilities (and power) between staff. That is, major changes in workflow can affect the power distribution among a staff, which in turn affects its culture. So how could a job candidate present him/herself as both adaptable and "standing for something" in their application materials, and then an interview? I believe that part of the answer lies in developing a personal brand.

Though branding is not a new concept, the potential and need for business library job seekers to apply branding concepts has expanded vastly since the advent of the Internet. Twenty years ago a job seeker's brand (pre-interview) was defined by application materials and references alone. Today employers routinely mine the Internet, including Facebook, for information on applicants to cull an often large pool. Librarians seeking business specialist positions would be wise to learn some branding concepts, including image/message creation and distribution. Some of these concepts can be applied in your cover letter. This is your one opportunity to show some personality in your application materials. In addition to addressing the position's responsibilities and your skill set's fit with them, consider how you would briefly sum up yourself and your talents. Often referred to as your elevator speech, this should be unique enough to clearly define you, and hence your brand.

Discussing a person's brand smacks of objectification, does it not? But to a certain extent, through the popularity of social networking sites, people have become somewhat objectified regardless. Though it may sometimes be uncomfortable, the savvy job seeker should market their brand online. This brand will get a big dose of humanity at the interview.

Karen G. Schneider authored a provocative article about personal branding for librarians in the November/December 2012 *American Libraries*. She wrote, ". . . we are librarians- simultaneously preoccupied, perturbed, and fascinated by our own image. . ." (p. 37). In my role as the public face of the H&R Block Business & Career Center (our career research, small business, and nonprofit development offshoot of our reference department), I do outreach to our branches, social service agencies, and business development organizations. When I am out I am acutely aware of both my image and the image I'm portraying of the Library. I work to neutralize any perception some people STILL associate with librarians – introverted, quiet, cautious.

How could an applicant for a business librarian position establish a personal brand in their application materials that is both authentic and appealing to a professionally diverse staff? First, provide a philosophy of work/librarianship in your cover letter that reflects both your desire and ability to work hard and your

adaptability. Whether it is created within a staff or imposed by an outside force, change is inevitable. To demonstrate your technology skills and further develop your personal brand, you could create a simple website or a blog (that has attracted readers!). Either of these things should contain content about your approach to reference. An applicant could provide a couple of testimonials in their resume that reflect their brand, work ethic, and adaptability.

The real opportunity to establish a personal brand, of course, is the interview. Unless you have concrete reason to feel certain that your specific suggestions (which in part compose your brand) are exactly what that library and/or staff are looking for, in your interview you need to frame your suggestions as exactly that, suggestions. This is a tightrope- every job candidate needs to appear to stand for something, but also be adaptable. The frame you put around your suggestions and the way this frame is interpreted will determine your fit for the position.

What if you're a new job seeker seeking a position as a business librarian? Even if you are a new graduate, or have not worked in a library yet (many MLS graduates have not), you still need to establish a personal brand, based on your philosophy of business librarianship and your personal interaction style. Among the suggestions that Schneider makes in establishing a personal brand are to ask yourself, "If I asked my friends to describe me, what would they say?" and "What's my personal mantra?" She also reminds readers that online information about a job seeker inevitably represents that person to others whether they like it or not. So take charge of that information. In comparing LinkedIn and Facebook, the latter allows for greater brand-shaping because of the bigger variety of content that can be posted. Are Facebook status updates and uploaded photos part of your professional library brand? If you're Facebook friends with some of your coworkers (many people are), then they are. Those items reflect your personality, which is a huge part of your personal brand. LinkedIn allows for the posting of "hard data" regarding your brand- resume information, references, etc. Facebook humanizes this information. Used carefully together, they can bring your personal and professional brand to life. Facebook can be used for professional networking if done in the right way. You do not need to reveal intimate aspects of your personality to your colleagues- just some basic things that give them a bit more of a sense of who you are beyond a business librarian. What are your hobbies? Concerts or sporting events attended? etc. This will supplement in-person correspondence. Use Facebook to gently, responsibly generate a positive "feel" about you to other staff. Given Facebook's highly social nature, this "feel" (your personal brand) will spread with little effort on your part. This can be a good conversation starter when you have the opportunity to talk with staff in person.

It's true that some library work environments are not as keen on the kind of interaction I'm describing above, but a little personal talk in some form is crucial (and hopefully natural- after all, you are around your coworkers many hours a week) in selling your personal brand. Schneider reminds us that the field is crowded, and you must stand out.

Here's one final situation: What if you have a personal brand, but would like to change it? You might want to do this if you'd like to enter a different area of the profession- perhaps transferring from reference to management. You can't change your brand too much; that would make you inauthentic. The challenge of doing this depends on how well-established your brand is. Share information with your colleagues about how you're leading the workflow or imparting positive changes in your area of the library. Once people start to think of you as a leader (whether of people or of workflow), they will visualize you in such a capacity much more readily. Changing your brand or image isn't selling out- it's just changing the content of your brand to reflect your evolving professional priorities.

As business librarians, many of us help entrepreneurs realize their dreams of starting a business. Branding is the key to creating a perception of a product or service in the minds of customers. Likewise, personal branding is key to creating a perception of yourself to your professional colleagues. In today's world there are more ways than ever for librarians to create a personal brand. And in today's competitive job market, taking the time to do this is crucial. Business librarians should familiarize themselves with personal branding and its parallels to business branding to mentor our next generation of professionals.

By leveraging a few branding concepts, they can create a job application package that reflects and applies their professional knowledge.