

## PERSONAL VERSION

This is a so called personal version (manuscript as accepted for publishing after the review process but prior to final layout and copyediting) of the article.

Manai, Aicha and Holmlund, Maria (2015), Self-Marketing Brand Skills for Business Students, *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, Vol. 33, Iss.5, 749-762. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/MIP-09-2013-0141>

Readers are kindly asked to use the official publication in references.

## SELF-MARKETING BRAND SKILLS FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – Despite the widespread interest in self-marketing, scant research has been published about students' self-marketing skills. The purpose of this paper is to address this research gap and develop a framework for self-marketing brand skills specific to business students.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Aaker's Brand Identity Planning Model (2002) was used to construct personal-brand-identity elements. Empirical data were gathered from interviews with 17 students from two business schools in Finland, who were selected using a snowballing sampling technique.

**Findings** – Branding-related elements, together with empirically grounded themes, emerged and were developed into a framework for developing self-marketing brand skills. Self-marketing brand core, self-marketing brand goals and self-marketing brand activities were suggested and further divided into sub-topics, becoming the content of the new framework.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study provides a starting point for further research on self-marketing skills from a branding perspective.

**Practical implications** – The paper discusses several important practical implications for business students who wish to improve their job-seeking success.

**Originality/value** – Rather than adopting a knowledge or activity perspective on self-marketing skills in job searching, the study extends the current knowledge by taking a complementary view, i.e. a branding perspective, and highlights students' mental preparedness and drive.

**Keywords** Skills, Self-development, Business education, Brand skills, Job-seeking skills, Self-marketing

**Paper type** Research paper

## **Introduction**

There is a need to develop students' self-marketing skills both in practice and theoretically (Clark, 2005; Taylor, 2003; Kelley & Bridges, 2005; Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005). In today's increasingly competitive and global job market, having a degree and being qualified may not be enough to secure a job. An individual is also expected to possess the appropriate self-marketing skills to prove that he/she is indeed the right fit for the job. As such, business students express concerns about their job-seeking skills and communicate a desire for support in the area of self-marketing. They are concerned about increasing their chances of acquiring an attractive job, whereas employers simultaneously aim at finding suitably competent employees. Societies around the world have an interest in this as well, given that they seek to disrupt the trend of increasing unemployment rates among business graduates and to shorten the length of time that these graduates are unemployed.

Self-marketing may provide students with a set of competitive skills and tools that can be utilised not only upon graduation when applying for employment but also throughout a lifetime of career changes and expanding business arrangements. As a result, during the past two decades, self-marketing has become a widely popular subject in self-help book publishing (e.g., Covey, 1989; Beals, 2008), consultancy services and various websites that discuss job seeking and career development. Within the self-help management movement, the phenomenon of personal branding has grown in parallel with self-marketing. Personal branding focuses on how an individual's sets of skills, motivations and interests are arranged, crystallized and labelled—i.e., branded—and offers a programmatic set of strategies for individuals to improve their chances at business success (e.g., Arruda, 2003; Lair et al., 2005). Personal branding has been practiced for decades by movie, sports and pop stars and has been taken up by an increasing

number of leaders in business and politics. Branding, as such, is not a new concept or set of practices, but its use by persons entering into or transiting within the labour market is relatively new. Thus far, it is surprising that more of this interest in self-marketing brand skills has not affected the discipline of marketing in terms of formal research or academic curricula, especially outside the US and the UK.

Some academic studies have focused on the substance-related skills needed by marketing and business majors and by MBA students prior to entering the work force (e.g., Clark, 2005; Hopkins, Raymond & Carlson, 2011). Others have addressed the lack of coverage of these skills in the curriculum (Taylor, 2003; Kelley & Bridges, 2005). One widely cited academic study on self-marketing is by McCorkle, Alexander, Reardon and Kling (2003) concerning students' job-searching skills. It focused on sources of job/career information, methods of searching for entry-level jobs, entry-level job preparation and other job-search variables, and it distinguished between discipline-related and transferable skills. The results of the authors' survey in a college of business in the United States revealed, for example, that young female students with a higher grade-point average (GPA) or who are closer to graduation are as prepared as students with low levels of job-search reluctance and career indecisiveness. These are tentative results, but we can assume that they still hold true today. They indicate that university students vary in terms of how actively they prepare for their upcoming careers. The results also suggest how aware they are of and how they utilise different communication channels, as well as network opportunities to prepare themselves.

Although the self-marketing concept is recognised in the literature on many levels, it seems that there is an insufficient theoretical basis for it. Most research conducted on job-seeking skills among students has focused on substance-related skills, with a couple of studies directed at

general self-marketing skills. However, self-marketing in general, and particularly different facets of it, have not yet been investigated in depth. Still, such investigation is vital to understanding not only how students search and prepare for jobs and effectively obtain and market their skills, abilities and knowledge but also how they mentally prepare and manage themselves as brands to stand out in the competitive job market. Branding aspects of students' self-marketing are more under-researched than the former. Branding has, as a strategy, become increasingly important as a flexible response to a crowded communication world, and it can be applied to individuals as job applicants. Viewing self-marketing skills through a branding lens may be one way to provide advantages in the business world, where tough competition is more the norm than the exception and where mental training and networking have become increasingly important. Therefore, the exploration of self-marketing skills from a branding perspective constitutes the core of this study.

Against this background, the aim of this study is to explore the phenomenon of self-marketing by developing a framework for self-marketing brand skills for business students. The framework is intended to help students learn how to get ahead in their professions when they begin their working lives and during possible career changes and competitive situations. Toward this, we examine self-marketing insights and models in branding literature, self-improvement books and studies regarding students' self-marketing skills, abilities and expectations. The empirical data are derived from interviews with seventeen business students in two business schools in Helsinki, Finland.

The study is intended to contribute to the rather limited knowledge about students' self-marketing skills. Subsequently, rather than adopting a knowledge or activity perspective about self-marketing skills in job searching, the study extends the current knowledge by taking a

complementary view, i.e., a branding perspective, and highlights students' mental preparedness and drive. Students, especially business students, will both gain a framework for developing their self-marketing branding skills from a branding perspective and receive concrete suggestions for improving their skills in this area. Such skills could, in the future, become part of a portfolio in documenting students' personal and professional development.

### **Self-Marketer's Brand Identity**

In this study, the concept of self-marketing is defined as the means by which one communicates one's abilities to a wider audience in networking situations, in applying for jobs and in making a name for oneself as a means of getting ahead in one's career. 'When properly executed, self-marketing should differentiate the individual in an increasingly crowded marketplace. The progress from consumer branding to company branding to the branding of a person and a career is hardly surprising when we consider the push for consolidating the branding movement via an ideology of individual efficacy, identity, and control' (Lair et al., 2005, p. 314). Thus, studying this concept of self-marketing from the perspective of existing branding theory will enable us to gain deeper insight into the practical applications of self-marketing.

The study relies on one of the seminal branding researcher Aaker's characterization of brands in a business setting. The key to building a strong brand lies in understanding the brand identity, which includes a core identity consisting of the essence of the brand and an extended identity (Aaker, 2002; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2002). In addition to these two brand elements, brands also consist of what Aaker (2002) defined as the brand's value propositions, which are statements of the functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits delivered by the brand that

provide value to the customer. The following list combines the three elements into personal-brand-identity elements and applies them to illustrate a graduating business student's fictitious personal brand in a job-seeking setting.

Personal-brand-identity elements with fictitious example:

*(1) Core identity described with key words such as:*

- Education: bachelor exam from the UK in design management and soon master exam in marketing from Finland.
- Skills: multilingual (fluent in spoken and written English, French, Spanish and German) and possess up-to-date IT skills.
- Personality: social and outgoing, with leader qualities.
- Values: prepared to work hard and have high moral standards.
- Experience: work experience from customer service, front and back-office in five different international companies in different lines of business. Three-year coaching experience with a junior football team.

*(2) Extended identity described with key words such as:*

- Skills and abilities: graduated with high but not top grades. Good negotiator and communicator.
- Attitudes: ambitious and goal oriented. Moderate risk taker.
- Cultural aspects: born and raised in a multicultural family and have lived in four countries for longer than six months.

*(3) Value propositions such as:*

- Functional benefits: like working in teams and achieving desired results within set deadlines.
- Emotional benefits: aim to contribute to a positive atmosphere and a well-functioning work community.
- Self-expressive benefits: aim for creative yet functioning problem solving.

- Relationship benefits: aim to stay committed as a loyal employee and see long-term thinking as a basis for business.

The elements are divided into three main categories. The bolded concepts originate in the brand models and constitute the personal-brand-identity elements, whereas the other content consists of examples that illustrate what the elements can mean in practice when a job seeker self-evaluates himself/herself.

The *core identity*, according to Aaker (2002), represents the timeless essence of the brand; therefore, one's core identity relates to the fundamental characteristics that make one who he/she is. In Table 1, the core identity is constructed from education, skills, personality, values and experience. The next category, *extended identity*, includes details that enable the individual to visualise what a brand stands for and elements that give completeness to the brand. In the table, they are illustrated as abilities, attitudes and cultural aspects. These four elements complete one's core identity. The final category is the *value proposition*, namely how the student as a potential employee can provide real value to a potential employer. The value proposition consists of functional, emotional, self-expressive and relationship benefits. Functional benefits provide functional utility; in this example, benefits such as achieving the desired results within a set deadline. Emotional benefits refer to feelings and more abstract issues, such as those associated with an employee functioning in a work community. For example, being creative in problem solving is a means of providing self-expressive benefits in a self-marketing construct. With respect to recent graduates, this relates to how they express themselves, that is, in how they put their individual characteristics on display. Finally, a brand-customer relationship, according to Aaker (2002), often derives from the value proposition, or it can originate from the brand

identity itself. In Table 1, the relationship benefit could refer to a potential long-term and loyal affiliation between an individual and his/her place of employment.

### *Personal Qualities*

Morgan (2004) provided a guide to replacing the traditional view of branding with what he called the 'challenger culture'. Morgan (2004) introduced a set of five personal qualities, and four of these five qualities are also applicable to the development of self-marketing skills.

The first quality, *denting*, refers to driving the brand vision—in this case, one's personal brand—forward and interpreting a rejection as a request for additional information. The concept of denting is similar to that of charisma, especially in that it relies on possessing high self-esteem and having a vision. The second quality, *binding*, refers to how challengers create singularity of direction across a team. Binding can also be applied to self-marketing, as success in business is not based on individual talent and capacity alone; rather, it tends to be the result of teamwork and the ability to act as a functioning and productive member of a team (Morgan, 2004, p. 116). The third quality, *leaning*, refers to exposing oneself to risk and knowing how to profit from it. Leaning can be used as one method of self-marketing, and it certainly helps in developing self-marketing skills. The fourth quality, *refuse*, refers not only to the ability to refuse but also to having a very strong sense of what holds true—despite what anyone else may think on the matter (Morgan, 2004, p. 116). Applying this notion to self-marketing, this means showing a good and firm character and the courage to refuse to comply with what one finds objectionable.

The brand identity table is useful in that each person using it can visualise it from the point of view of his/her own skills. Morgan's (2004) challenger-culture personal quality types add to the preliminary understanding of students' self-marketing brand skills. Next, we will present our empirical insights and use them to develop an empirically grounded framework.

## Method

Given the exploratory stage of the research, we decided to use a qualitative approach. We used in-depth face-to-face interviews because they are flexible and suitable for developing a new understanding. Moreover, the interview method is commonly used in theory development in many areas of marketing. We employed purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) to select master's students who were close to graduation, variation sampling to ensure diversity in the students' university affiliation and field of study and snowball and chain sampling to locate information-rich participants. Finding the participants was relatively easy, and all of the contacted students agreed to participate. The participants were students at either the Hanken School of Economics or the Aalto University School of Business in Helsinki, Finland, both of which are top business schools and similar in terms of their graduates' initial salary levels and positions. None of the participants had full-time job experience; in fact, most of them had worked part-time during their studies. All of the students were of Finnish origin and under the age of 30 (25 years on average). Half of them were women; half of them had marketing or management as their majors, and half were majoring in economics or finance.

Seventeen students were considered suitable for this exploratory study. In an exploratory study, such as the one presented here, the number of informants is not a key issue since the aim is not to obtain generalisable data and have a random sample that is representative of a target population. Instead, the participants hold similar views. This study is an abductive study (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Gadde & Dubois, 2002) in which insights from previous models and new empirical data are merged, resulting in a new model. The aim of this study is to build a new model rather than to understand and compare the students and their views. The model is more

encompassing in comparison to many current self-marketing models and lists, and it combines a detailed analysis of the core, goals and activities of self-marketing brand skills.

The interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes and were conducted in September and October 2011 on the schools' premises. We utilised a semi-structured interview guide, but the participants were encouraged to speak freely about both self-marketing in general and key themes from Aaker's (2002) established Brand Identity Planning Model, Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2002) core identity model and Morgan's (2004) personal quality types. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. In the analysis, the aim was to explore the students' views and thoughts related to self-marketing skills and, based on this, develop a new framework. We analysed the data during and after the interviews in accordance with the techniques suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Spiggle (1994). The steps involved in the analysis were summarising and coding the data and organising them into tables, summaries and figures. The overall aim was to identify patterns in the data units.

### **Empirical Findings**

When asked to describe self-marketing, the students said that it meant being competitive and presenting oneself effectively in person and on paper such that one stands out and, in the end, achieves professional success. The informants were overall surprisingly similar and spoke about having had to compete against other job seekers and the need to stand out in the competition, the fact that unique skills are needed and the fact that they need to do various things to be competitive. They had jobs and expected tough competition in the business world. Therefore, Morgan's personal quality guide became suitable in the analysis of the data; not the

relevance but the degree of emphasis expressed by the informants varied. Two of the students responded to the question of how they would define self-marketing as follows:

Self-marketing is about marketing the self, marketing me, instead of a chocolate bar or a beauty spa; I should market myself, my strengths, my skills, my specialties and my expertise... (Hän, 20.10.2011)

I expect that, if I market myself effectively, I will be noticed and remembered, my CV will stand out the most from all the other applicants, my personality will stay in the mind of a potential employer and I will ultimately get the job I want. (Ino, 17.10.2011)

Many of the students' responses reflected a branding perspective of self-marketing, thus supporting the selected focus of self-marketing in this study. A great amount of self-reflection is needed, and in fact, the interviewees who were not only marketing students but also pursuing other majors highlighted the need to have a branding-oriented frame of mind. Support for the branding view was also apparent, as many of the interviewees mentioned that they, to some extent, analyse their core identity and the extended distinctiveness around the core as well as what benefits they can offer as employees.

The interviewees also emphasised that they consider self-marketing a long-lasting and complex process that requires a significant amount of introspection and external support. Many of the students said that they rely on both introspection and external support and stressed how fundamental these are to self-marketing while simultaneously recognising one's own limitations, as illustrated in the following quotation:

I think sometimes we are blind when it comes to ourselves, like we don't even realize if we're really bad or good at something, and I think if you want to do self-marketing and really stand out, you should first know who you are and really understand yourself as a person and as a potential employee. So I have, for example, thought of going to see our career advisor at school. I think we have one... So, basically, self-marketing is something you can't do alone, I think; you have to have someone to maybe push you in the right direction... (Mari, 17.10.2011)

As part of the self-reflection, the students mentioned that self-marketing should progress from the inside outward and not the opposite; in other words, an individual needs to begin by carefully assessing his/her own identity, what that identity is constructed of and what extended features are around it and only then begin implementing those revelations and communicating them to the outside world.

Five informants revealed that they have a clear plan for the future and see self-marketing as an important part of their plans. One of them said that self-marketing is particularly important now since he is about to graduate:

I think self-marketing is really important...I know it might sound really selfish, but if I want to make it and get a good employment position either where I'm working part time now or in another place, I indeed need to strongly market myself, so I do have an explicit strategy basically for how I plan to get my ideal job, and self-marketing is a part of that strategy. (Karl 15.10.2011)

One of the main means that the students are interested in utilising to strengthen and develop their self-marketing skills is, in fact, themselves. This was evidenced by the interest they showed in working on themselves and analysing their own skills and abilities. They also mentioned other forms of support, such as the courses offered in school, outside workshops and other students. Developing self-marketing skills seems to begin from within and then leads to the use of various sources of external support.

Somewhat surprisingly, the students raised the specific issue of having and developing charisma. They expressed that this characteristic is highly valued and is a tool for successful self-marketing. For example, the students clearly stated that, if they were offered support and guidelines on how they could build a charismatic presence either on their own or with external support, they would immediately seize this opportunity.

Career support is something that many universities offer, but it seems as if the students want and need additional help. Surprisingly few of the students said that they have a self-marketing plan for the future. Thus, outsiders can act as a catalyst in the students' process of initiating and developing self-marketing skills. Some of the interviewees utilise the university in many ways:

Yeah, I think I will contact the career advisor in my school. I've given my CV to some more educated and experienced people to check and give me feedback on it. I have also spent quite a lot of time soul searching and trying to really grasp what my strengths and weaknesses are... and I also always participate in those working breakfast events at school. I think they are a good way of networking... I am

active in self-marketing related activities, I think, and I do have a need for it in my life... (Johan, 15.10.2011)

A majority of the informants showed deep concern over the fact that self-marketing is not discussed often at the university, in courses or with peers. Where some may have been creating video CVs, constructing PowerPoint presentations on themselves and standing out in the crowd with the use of innovative techniques, others felt lost and questioned how they too could effectively market themselves. The informants unanimously agreed that these tools should be taught as part of their curriculum so that, upon graduation, they would feel well prepared to enter the workforce. Some of their comments were as follows:

I think we should even have some course at school that would guide us on how to bring out the best. I mean, we have those places that you can get your CV checked, but more would be great. (Rosen, 17.10.2011)

I think we should have more workshops where we could practice marketing ourselves, like how we would act in an interview and stuff like that. And I wouldn't mind getting good tips and pointers from professionals. (Johan, 15.10.2011)

The same concepts can be applied to a person that can be applied to a service or product. I mean, from a marketing point of view, I think utilising relevant literature and then applying it to a self-marketing activity can be very helpful to better understand yourself and work on your own strengths and how to bring them out... (Mari 17.10.2011)

The students also expressed anxiety about graduating and beginning their careers; they felt confused about where to begin applying for jobs and what skills they should highlight in doing so. In this respect, they clearly articulated a need for examples on ways to market themselves.

As could be expected, many of the students shed light on the role of social media for self-marketing purposes. Almost all of the students claimed that they pay close attention to how they portray themselves on social media sites and in fact that they consider social media the main channel for self-marketing:

I think social media is a really important part of self-marketing because it seems that everything happens online these days, and having accounts like LinkedIn and being visible on Monster, for example, can really help in finding good employment. And you also get to meet interesting new people there... so I really pay attention to what I post on my profile, what types of pictures I have and who I associate with, just in case. (Hän, 20.10.2011)

The students, therefore, confirmed what Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) recommended: one should carefully select which online channels to use from the hundreds available, examine these websites, who visits them and what they have to offer, and ultimately choose only a few on which to be active.

### **A Definition and New Framework for Developing Self-Marketing Brand Skills**

Based on the findings from the empirical data, we propose the following definition of self-marketing in a job-seeking setting:

Self-marketing is the process by which an individual formulates and communicates his/her skills and abilities in a manner that enables him/her to stand out in a crowd and increase employment likelihood in any situation involving job hunting, developing a career and/or networking.

This definition captures the core of self-marketing from a branding perspective. In addition to a significant amount of self-reflection, external assistance is typically required for successful self-marketing.

Based on the literature review, combined with empirical material, we developed a new framework for self-marketing brand skills. The model is specifically developed to address job-seeking context, but it could be applicable to other settings as well—for example in building a social network or a business network, building mental confidence or finding a spouse. The model consists of the following three main elements that distinguish different aspects of self-marketing brand skills: brand core, brand goals and brand activities. The model combines Aaker's fundamental brand elements with the core of the self-marketing brand. Morgan's (2004) personal qualities, which refer to the objectives of self-marketing, provide direction to the activities and are labelled as brand goals. Next to the elements of 'what', i.e., the brand core, and 'why', i.e., brand goals, an additional 'how' element is needed to denote what can be done in relation to the brand core and with the aim of reaching the brand goals. In our model, these activities are added as a third main element. The empirical data suggested different activities that the students either are involved in or would like to be involved in so they can improve their skills to help them stand out as job seekers. These activities were grouped into the third main element of the model. See Figure 1 for the contents of each of these elements.

Figure 1: Self-Marketing Brand Skills



The core of self-marketing can be described with the core identity, the extended identity and the value proposition. These are explained in more depth in the framework, which relies on the transfer of classical branding concepts to a job-seeking setting. The brand goals in this setting are captured by Morgan's (2004) concepts and supported by the empirical material. Brand activities correspond to the empirical data and are grouped into two main areas: self-evaluation and strategy building. The three main elements (concepts written in capital letters) together with sub-elements (concepts denoted with the bold style in the figure) can be used to distinguish the fundamental and complementary issues related to self-marketing brand skills. More detailed

activities stem from the empirical study and need not necessarily correspond to an individual student's situation but show an array of different options. The new model is a structural model that specifies key elements of self-marketing brand skills rather than explaining the development of these brand skills over time.

## **Implications**

### *Theoretical Implications*

First, this paper argues that branding skills are needed in a job-seeking context. The study subsequently broadens the scope of self-marketing skills by adding a fundamentally different but complementary element. This paper contributes to our knowledge about job-seeking skills by offering a new construct, i.e., self-marketing brand skills as a new employability skill type. These new skills are defined to capture mental preparedness and drive in the process by which an individual formulates and communicates his/her skills and abilities to stand out in a crowd and increase the likelihood of securing employment. While these skills have been recognised by a few earlier studies, they have not been explored in depth, nor are they typically included in skill sets (e.g., Dacko, 2001; Taylor 2003, Dacko, 2006a). This study proposes that brand skills can be added as a separate skill set to skill sets and personal quality features, as presented in the current literature. This study satisfies Shepherd's (2005) call for using insights from theoretical frameworks, such as identity theory and personal branding, to advance insights into self-marketing. Furthermore, this study proposes a view on self-marketing that is based on the individual's self-motivation and drive and is broader than self-branding, which relies upon communication activities and the image of aggressive self-packaging (Lair et al., 2005).

Compared to previous job-seeking skills studies, this paper adopts a branding perspective for self-marketing skills and develops our understanding of self-marketing branding skills by proposing a new framework that captures these types of skills. The framework distinguishes between three different elements of self-marketing branding skills, brand core, brand goals and brand activities, each of which, in turn, is further described with sub-elements. The framework is rather broad yet detailed, and it is firmly anchored in the branding literature and fused with empirical data. In this way, a more encompassing view of transferability skills is achieved whereby more detailed job-seeker skills profiles and descriptions can be made. Self-marketing branding skills can be considered part of a person's personality (McCorkle et al., 1999; Taylor, 2003), but this current study simultaneously proposes that they can also refer to a set of activities. Consequently, in terms of the behaviours, techniques and attitudes, self-marketing brand skills cover the broad range of aspects that McCorkle et al. (2003, p. 199) included in their definition of job search skills.

The empirical insights from this qualitative study complement the few reported empirical studies on self-marketing skills seen from the students' perspective, especially as no other qualitative enquiries were found in the literature review. This study confirms previous empirical findings about self-marketing skills, such as those of McCorkle et al. (2003), who also found that students differed greatly in terms of how prepared they were for job searching and how they felt anxiety and a lack of direction. The informants in the current study reported the same results and feelings. Our literature review reveals that previous academic studies focusing on self-marketing skills have not previously been reported on Finnish university students and that, nearly without exception, all empirical data on the topic originate in the US and the UK. This could indicate that Finnish universities lag in understanding and in systematically developing a number of key job-

seeking skills for their students. The same could potentially also hold true for many other countries, so more empirical studies outside the US and the UK are encouraged.

Branding skills are formed before, during and after a student receives an education and training and also continuously while in the workplace after graduating as an individual's working experience accumulates. Additionally, self-marketing branding skills represent a skill set area whose development has long been neglected in many college curriculums. Therefore, this study offers extensive suggestions for how students directly and universities and others indirectly can improve student skills in this area.

### *Practical Implications*

The interviews highlighted the need for opportunities for students aiming to improve their self-marketing skills, especially concerning how to manage themselves as brands. The table below shows some recommendations for how students can manage and strengthen their self-marketing brand skills with activities related to personal competence development and communication/networking. All of these recommendations can and should be introduced as soon as possible in the curriculum and, with the exception of providing some professional assistance, do not require any major investments from the students.

SELF-MARKETING BRAND	
SKILL ELEMENT	
	<b>Some Implications for Business Students</b>
<b>Brand Core</b>	
Core Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Start early, and throughout your studies regularly dedicate time to analysing and strengthening your set of skills and abilities.</li> </ul>

Extended Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Define skills and abilities in a broad manner and consider—in addition to substance-related skills—teamwork, creativity, self-motivation/drive, flexibility, leadership, verbal and written communication, global and cultural sensitivity, commercial awareness, planning, negotiation and persuasion, and stress-tolerance skills.</li> </ul>
Value Proposition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify your skills and abilities in terms of what makes you a unique and valuable employee.</li> <li>Match your set of skills with your analysis of employers and job functions to find the best combinations.</li> </ul>
<b>Brand Goals</b>	
Denting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognise and reinforce a skill or ability that is exceptional and valuable and will help you stand out during your initial contact with employers.</li> </ul>
Binding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop and communicate teamwork skills related to, for example, group negotiations and conflict handling, and also strive to gain experience as a group leader.</li> </ul>
Leaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Challenge yourself and regularly get outside of your ‘comfort zone’ to build confidence and achieve goals.</li> </ul>
Refusing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build a strong, healthy self-esteem as part of your character, which will guide your decisions and actions.</li> </ul>
<b>Brand Activities</b>	
Self-Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a desired brand identity from within that draws on your own unique strengths.</li> <li>Seek assistance, support, and experience from others, and read personal development books to develop self-reflection and goal formulation skills.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider what life values/ethical principles you have that can affect what kinds of businesses/companies/jobs you are willing/unwilling to accept.</li> <li>• Practice what you learn and strive to achieve your goals, but do not get discouraged if your plans do not materialise at first or if you encounter disappointments. Accept that sometimes luck and coincidence can play a role, so put yourself in a place where they might help you.</li> </ul>
<p>Strategy Building</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dedicate time to formulating short-term and long-term professional goals, and set up a rough timetable and sub-goals for how to reach them.</li> <li>• Find and attend courses at your university or other educational institutions to get theoretical insights into self-promotion, and then practice them.</li> <li>• Participate in events at your university that offer the opportunity to work on self-marketing skills, e.g., workshops on CV writing and networking, especially in areas recognised as weaknesses.</li> <li>• Select your top three future employers and learn about them in as much detail as possible, e.g., recruiting policies, future business strategies, and current and future desired skills.</li> <li>• Find out about and actively use suitable/safe online job-mediating social media, e.g., LinkedIn.</li> </ul>

Table 1. Strategies for Managing Self-Marketing Brand Skills

The self-marketer's brand identity and the framework for self-marketing branding skills aid in identifying what the students can strive to manage to strengthen their job searching. The models highlight various issues regarding which students can make personal assessments. For example, what is their current outlook and future desired outlook on the sub-elements of the

brand self-marketing core, goal and activities? To reinforce the students' job searching skills further, we recommend that they design a strategy for how to strengthen their self-marketing brand skills and how to match them with their substance-related knowledge skills.

One valuable method of using external assistance for developing self-marketing activities is career coaching, i.e., helping applicants embark on a career that suits their interests, aptitudes, personalities and areas of expertise. Whether this method is an absolute necessity for successful self-marketing is subject to debate. Fogde (2011) put forward interesting ideas on the topic of career coaching and highlighted its importance in today's society, where academics and white-collar workers are encouraged to enhance their marketability. Knowing oneself is highly important; one should be able to analyse both the positive and negative characteristics of one's personality and be confident enough to admit weaknesses, which inevitably exist. Thus, in the process of career coaching students, the students dynamically take part in their own self-construction.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

Like any other research project, our study has some limitations. The most obvious limitation is that a relatively small number of students and merely two business schools were examined, which means that caution must be exercised in generalising the results to other contexts. Business students in general and our selected participants in particular account for a small proportion of students, which makes generalising the results rather risky. The study, therefore, starting with the title and introduction, explicitly focuses on business students. Business/marketing students could be more likely than other students to prepare for their careers,

which can accentuate self-marketing issues. Nevertheless, fairly in-depth insights were obtained from the students, and this has provided sufficient and rich data for reaching tentative conclusions in this exploratory study. Examining more students, first-year students and using combined methods would be extremely useful for furthering knowledge in this area, as would using a longitudinal approach to reveal the aspects of the dynamics. However, as a first attempt at building a brand-oriented self-marketing skill framework, this study serves as a source of inspiration for other researchers.

We believe that other parties beyond the empirical scope of the current study could also be considered in upcoming studies since they would provide valuable insights, including faculty, career counsellors, company recruiters, successful career people and even unsuccessful people as well.

Further research on skills development and the division between discipline and support skills can result in an even greater platform for self-marketing literature. McCorkle et al.'s (2003) study highly recommended that students and universities build students' marketable skills, and the current study underlines this need as well.

Self-marketing, in various guises, is now a rapidly growing business in its own right, and the range of advice that is now publicly available is serving to democratise the process. What was once a service provided by others is now an activity that one is encouraged to undertake oneself (Shepherd, 2005, p. 1). Consequently, as self-marketing becomes a more popular field of interest, further research will be required to maintain and further prove its relevance to the research discipline.

## **References**

- Aaker, D. (2002), *Building Strong Brands*, The Free Press, New York, NY.
- Aaker, D., and Joachimsthaler, E. (2002), *Brand Leadership*, The Free Press, New York, NY.
- Arruda, W. (2003), “An introduction to personal branding: a revolution in the way we manage our careers”, available at: [www.reachcc.com](http://www.reachcc.com) (accessed 15 June 2012)
- Beals, J. (2008), *Self Marketing Power: Branding Yourself as a Business of One*, Keynote Publishing Omaha, NB.
- Burkšaitiene, N. Tereseviciene, M., and Kaminskiene, L. (2011), “Portfolio use for documentation of personal and professional growth gained outside academia”, *Baltic Journal of Management*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 245–262.
- Clark, T. (2005), “The business profession: A mandatory, noncredit, cocurricular career preparation program for undergraduate business majors”, *Business Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 3, pp. 271–289.
- Coffey, A., and Atkinson, P. (1996), *Making Sense of Qualitative Data—Complementary Research Strategies*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Covey, S.R. (1989), *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Simon & Schuster, London.
- Dacko, S. G. (2001), “Narrowing skill development gaps in marketing and MBA programs: The role of innovative technologies for distance learning”, *Journal of Marketing Education*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 228–239.
- Dacko, S. G. (2006a), “Developing the top five skills within an MBA programme: Implications for management educators”, *International Journal of Management Education*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 21–32.
- Dacko, S. G. (2006b), “Narrowing the skills gap for marketers of the future”, *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 283–295.

- Fogde, M. (2011), "Governing through career coaching: Negotiations of self-marketing", *Organization*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 65–82.
- Gadde, L-E., and Dubois, A. (2002), "Systematic combining: An abductive approach to case research", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 55 No. 7, pp. 553–560.
- Graham, S. (2001), *Build Your Own Life Brand: A Powerful Strategy to Maximize Your Potential and Enhance Your Value for Ultimate Achievement*, Free Press, Fort Detroit, MI.
- Hopkins, C. D., Raymond, M. A., and Carlson, L. (2011), "Educating students to give them a sustainable competitive advantage", *Journal of Marketing Education*, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 337–347.
- Kaplan, A.M., and Haenlein, M (2010), "Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media", *Business Horizons*, Vol. 53 No. 1, pp. 59-68.
- Kelley, C. A., and Bridges, C. (2005), "Introducing professional and career development skills in the marketing curriculum", *Journal of Marketing Education*, Vol. 27, No. 5, pp. 212–218.
- Lair, D. J., Sullivan, K., and Cheney, G. (2005). "Marketization and the recasting of the professional self", *Management Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 307–343.
- McCorkle, D. E., Reardon, J., Alexander, J. F., Kling, N. D., Harris, R. C. and Iyer, R. V. (1999), "Undergraduate marketing students, group projects, and teamwork: The good, the bad, and the ugly?", *Journal of Marketing Education*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 106–117.
- McCorkle, D. E., Alexander, J. F., Reardon, J., and Kling, N. D. (2003), "Developing self-marketing skills: Are marketing students prepared for the job search?", *Journal of Marketing Education*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 196–207.

- Miles, M. B., and Huberman, A. M. (1994), *Qualitative Data Analysis* (2nd ed.), Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Morgan, A. (2004), *The Pirate Inside: Building a Challenger Brand Culture within Yourself and Your Organization*, Wiley Hoboken, NJ.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002), *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.), SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Shepherd, I. (2005), *From Cattle to Coke to Charlie: Meeting the Challenge of Self Marketing and Personal Branding*, Middlesex University Business School, London.
- Spiggle, S. (1994), "Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 491–503.
- Taylor, K. A. (2003), "Marketing yourself in the competitive job market: An innovative course preparing undergraduates for marketing careers", *Journal of Marketing Education*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 97–107.

### **Further reading**

- Burkšaitiene, N., Tereseviciene, M. and Kaminskiene, L. (2011), "Portfolio use for documentation of personal and professional growth gained outside academia", *Baltic Journal of Management*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 245-262.
- Dacko, S.G. (2006b), "Narrowing the skills gap for marketers of the future", *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 283-295.
- Graham, S. (2001), *Build Your Own Life Brand: A Powerful Strategy to Maximize Your Potential and Enhance Your Value for Ultimate Achievement*, Free Press, Fort Detroit, MI.

**About the authors**

Aicha Manai, MSc, is a Graduate from the Hanken School of Economics in Helsinki, Finland.

Dr Maria Holmlund is a Professor of Marketing at the Hanken School of Economics in Helsinki, Finland. Her research interests include methodological and conceptual issues related to service and customer-oriented management in business-to-business and business-to-consumer markets. Her publications have appeared in, for example, *Journal of Marketing Management*, *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research* and *International Small Business Journal*. Dr Maria Holmlund is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [maria.holmlund-rytkonen@hanken.fi](mailto:maria.holmlund-rytkonen@hanken.fi)