The impact of executive personal branding on non-profit perception and communications

Lynnette Nolan*

Emerson College, Department of Marketing Communications, 120 Boylston Street, Boston, MA 02116, USA

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become an integral tool in public relations and marketing campaigns. Individuals now actively participate in conversations through Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) and also leverage these communications tools for personal branding. A relatively new concept, personal branding has been studied in various contexts, but there is a lack of investigation into the effective use of the ICTs for personal branding purposes in relation to the communications of non-profit executives. This paper analyzes the personal branding strategies or seven executives from non-profit organizations in the United States. The study aimed to determine the extent to which executives' personal branding communications aligned with the mission of their organizations. The results of this study are significant both for theorists and practitioners. The findings highlight the importance of personal branding in the non-profit sector; additionally, they help shape guidelines organizations can use to engage their executives in successful personal communications processes that raise awareness.

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1. Introduction

To date, much of the research revolving around the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ITCs) in public relations has been done with regard to corporations (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011; Pettigrew & Reber, 2010). Therefore, there is currently a lack of literature analyzing the effective use of ITCs in the non-profit sector. This paper aims to advance the mission of public relations for the public good by studying how non-profit executives use ITCs to communicate and advance the missions of their charities with the ultimate purpose of raising awareness and funds. Specifically, the project assesses the extent to which the personal branding strategies enacted by the executives reflect the values of the organization they represent and investigated if, and to what extent, the executives' posts align with and promote the missions of their charities.

With the rise of social networking sites, in addition to more robust webpages and blogs, social media has become an integral part of both public relations and marketing campaigns. Individuals are participating in social conversations through ICTs and these communications tools are becoming tools for personal branding. Personal branding is a relatively new concept that encompasses the strategies that one uses to promote one's self, both on and offline. Thus far, personal branding has been studied in connection to the sociological concept of the self (Miller, 1995), the potential to draw the interest of future employers (Peters, 2007; Schawbel, 2010), as well as in connection to cyber-vetting, a practice through which companies

* Tel.: +1 781 775 0579.
E-mail address: lynnette_nolan@emerson.edu

verify the information that job candidates have posted about themselves online (Berkelaar, Scacco, & Birdsell, 2014). However, no studies have yet been conducted to test the effective use of the ICTs for personal branding purposes and in relation to charitable actions.

The present study analyzes the personal branding strategies of seven executives representing popular non-profit organizations in the US. Popularity was defined in terms of the number of "likes" on Facebook. The aim of the study was to determine the extent to which executives' personal branding strategies aligned with the mission of their organizations.

The results of this study have significant implications for both theorists and practitioners. They highlight the importance of personal branding in the non-profit sector; additionally, they led to the development of a model that organizations can use in the future to engage their executives in a successful personal branding processes that raises awareness and ultimately funds.

2. Literature review

2.1. Branding: the intersection of identity and reputation

Corporate identity has historically been conveyed to stakeholders from the organization in a one-way stream of communications (Cornelissen, Christensen, & Kinuthia, 2012). However, in today's online culture, corporate communications are mirroring personal communications, with conversations and interactions happening in real-time over the Internet. Argenti and Druckenmiller (2004) asserted that corporate reputation results from a series of interactions between the organization and its stakeholders (Abratt & Kleyn, 2011). Public relations continues to shift from communications management practices to strategic relationship building activities (Kent & Taylor, 2002), and social media is providing a widely-adopted platform for real-time facilitation of relationship building, for both organizations and executives. The interactions of the non-profit executive feed into the two-way stream of corporate reputation and identity building and management.

While an executive retains his or her own identity, their reputation and image are public and they do reflect on their organization. Executive image plays a role in company's corporate identity, which helps to shape public perception. According to prior research, executives perceive seven aspects as contributing to corporate identity, included among the aspects are vision and mission, and values and beliefs (He, 2012). Therefore an executive aiming to promote his organization within the context of their personal branding would likely use mission and values based messaging in their personal branding communications, and effective, well-received personal branding communications of an organization's executives can serve to bolster that organization's corporate image and reputation.

The executive is expected to be aware of the context surrounding their organization, and its rhetoric; to enter into interactions unprepared or with conflicting messaging would find the executive to be out of face with his role within the organization (Goffman, 1967). An executive must not only be able to excel at his or her job functions; personal communications must be aligned, to a certain degree, with the messages of the respective organization.

2.2. Online presence: personal becomes professional

Non-profits, like many corporate brands, recognize the importance of being present on social media. However, although non-profit organizations recognize the cultural shift to sharing on social media, they are not taking full advantage of the potential to be sharing information (Waters & Jamal, 2011). For both the brand and the executive, it is imperative to have more than just a profile. Implementing a process for creating effective personal branding strategies is beneficial to both the executive and the organization. As Fombrun and Shanley (1990) discovered, firms that enjoy a good reputation are able to "charge premium prices" and "attract better applicants" (Furman, 2010). Organizational strategy has the potential to impact and build a positive reputation among publics (Abratt & Kleyn, 2011); favorable reputations are earned by acknowledging the factors upon which stakeholders evaluate an organization and shape perception.

Corporate branding and identity is not defined or created from the thoughts or actions of one person or department, but rather the result of the entire organization and the individuals comprising it (Melewar, Gotsi, & Andriopoulos, 2012) and executive communications, professional and personal, should be a component of overall organizational strategy. Furthermore, personal branding can, and should, be considered in both theoretical and practical environments.

To determine what branding strategies can be deemed appropriate, we refer to Goffman's (1967) face theory research. When executives align themselves with their organization's mission, assuming that the executives' personal beliefs and values align with those of their employer, they can communicate confidently and assuredly to their audiences because they believe themselves to be in good face (Goffman, 1967). Although online, and not in person, the personal branding communications are the executives interactions and because these individuals are speaking about causes and values they believe to be worthwhile, valid and true, publics can find these professionals to be authentic and the communication of their messages to be effective and strategic.

3. Method

In order to gain an understanding of the role that organizational values play in nonprofit executives personal branding communications, and to answer the research question: *to what extent to executives' personal branding strategies align with*