

HOW TO GET AHEAD BY MARKETING YOURSELF



What makes some professionals stand out while others are merely competent? Top businesspeople have an edge. They're adept at selling themselves, not just their products and services.

Given the downsizing, re-engineering and belt-tightening in today's business world, the ability to market yourself effectively can have lasting effects on your career. Whether you're self-employed or work for someone else, if you have low visibility, you've got no visibility.

Personal marketing is about effectively packaging your product – you – for a presentation in an interview or review. No matter what your profession, you can develop the skills you need to advance your career. The following tips can help you create a personal marketing plan.

Network. Meet people – a lot of people, all types and levels, wherever you go and whatever you're doing. As Malcolm Forbes said: "There are no unimportant people."

Professionals conduct business with or promote those they know and respect. The quality of your work is a given and isn't enough. Networking opportunities abound, so take advantage of them. Don't overlook these places: elevators, the cafeteria, training sessions, meetings, meals with co-workers or clients and company-sponsored parties and events. Other networking venues include professional or community associations, conferences and the local chamber of commerce.

If you're job hunting, networking is a crucial strategy. You can secure leads from contacts you make at these events. Always bring your resume – seize the moment and show your initiative.

For some professionals, networking isn't easy. For example, Todd Karr, a director of Philadelphia-based SmithKline Beecham Pharmaceuticals, views himself as introverted. When he moved to his current position from an internal finance role, he had to change his style. Interacting with external customers required more effort than working with other employees. "Fortunately, I learned that having an introverted style isn't an acceptable reason to avoid networking situations," he says. He had to get used to getting out of his comfort zone as the situation dictated.

Consider the professional at a Philadelphia market research company who's been passed over for promotions repeatedly over the course of 25 years. He works hard but is always too busy to lunch with colleagues or participate in company outings. He complains that others who are promoted can't match his quality of work, but he doesn't realize that networking works.

Adjust your attitude. If you don't blow your own horn and market yourself, who will? If you ask successful professionals if they always feel confident, most will say no. They have to push themselves. Success isn't a matter of being lucky; luck is when opportunity and hard work come together.

Too often, people focus solely on what they need to do just to survive, says Mark Gore, president of an upcoming job search success book. "Figure out what you want and go for it," he says. "Zero in on what you can do now, not sometime down the road."

Try these suggestions to develop a confident attitude:

- Get rid of the notion that good things come to those who wait, the meek shall inherit the earth or it's not nice to talk about yourself.
- Accept that self-marketing is a survival skill.
- Change negative "self-talk," such as "Who would want to talk to me?" and "What do I have to offer?" to "Darn, I'm good," and "Others need to know what I have to offer."

Prepare. Planning and practice prevent poor performance. Prepare a 30-second "commercial" or introduction to use when meeting new people. Have another one for fellow employees at your company. Write these introductions from the perspective of someone who uses your product or services. "You'll have a better chance of getting someone's ear," Mr. LeBlanc says.

Prior to a meeting or other event, learn about the people who will be there. Bring your business cards – not to hand out indiscriminately but for appropriate situations. To help you follow up later, write notes on the back of the cards you receive.

Practice your handshake. It should be a firm grasp with three quick pumps, not a limp palm or a bone crusher. Make eye contact, smile and listen. If you're short on small talk, draw on books or newspaper articles you've read and ask others about themselves. Pay attention to common courtesies, such as saying thank you and valuing other people's time. Don't forget to follow up with fax, e-mail or a lunch invitation, and send thank-you notes to those who help you.

Invest your time. At work, you can volunteer to head committees or fund drives and attend picnics, parties and other corporate events. Don't forget that lunch is part of work: invite clients or co-workers. Stay up-to-date on internal personnel moves, and write notes of congratulations. Outside of work, participate in associations and other community and neighborhood groups.

Promote yourself. Don't be afraid to talk about the projects you work on. Write or speak about your area of expertise or a technique that helped you. For example, if you're in sales, write about relationship selling, or tell a story with lessons you've learned. Submit articles, notices of awards or other achievements or letters to the editor to company or association newsletters, local newspapers or professional journals.

If you're not a writer, find a ghostwriter or a co-author, or tape record your thoughts, transcribe them and hire an editor. Another way to gain visibility is to offer to be interviewed on your area of expertise.

Volunteer to speak at meetings, brown-bag lunches, community events or for local associations, colleges or high-school evening courses. If you don't feel confident about public speaking, find a coach. One way to get started is by introducing other speakers.

Use common sense and good manners. The following tips will help you present a consistent professional image:

- Return phone calls. Don't hold up someone else's project or deadline because you haven't returned a call. Even if you don't have answers, respond. Don't leave them hanging.
- Get along with others. The candidate who reaches the top likely knows how to get along with everyone from the cleaning crew to the president.
- Prepare for the worst and stay calm. Murphy's Law – if something can go wrong, it will – prevails in business meetings, presentations and other business situations.
- Respect other people's time. There's nothing worse than getting off on the wrong foot by being late. In today's business environment, stopping to chitchat when your colleague is under the gun or wasting time in a poorly planned meeting is a business faux pas.
- Listen. Don't interrupt or monopolize the conversation. Ask questions.

- Dress appropriately. Good grooming is key to a professional impression. Women: if you're wondering whether your skirt is too short, it probably is. Men: leave the Mickey Mouse tie at home.
- Respect other people's space. It's impolite to place your briefcase on a table or a desk. This includes using the phone without permission or peeking at papers on a desk before your meeting starts.

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