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What is This?

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MARKETIZATION AND THE RECASTING OF THE PROFESSIONAL SELF
The Rhetoric and Ethics of Personal Branding

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Within the personal branding movement, people and their careers are marketed as brands complete with promises of performance, specialized designs, and tag lines for success. Because personal branding offers such a startlingly overt invitation to self-commodification, the phenomenon invites a careful and searching analysis. This essay begins by examining parallel developments in contemporary communication and employment climates and exploring how personal branding arises as (perhaps) an extreme form of a market-appropriate response. The contours of the personal branding movement are then traced, emphasizing the rhetorical tactics with which it responds to increasingly complex communication and employment environments. Next, personal branding is examined with a critical eye to both its effects on individuals and the power relations it instantiates on the basis of social categories such as gender, age, race, and class. Finally, the article concludes by reflecting on the broader ethical implications of personal branding as a communication strategy.

The business self-help genre of management communication traces its roots at least back to Dale Carnegie's (1936/ 1982) *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Countless other authors have followed Carnegie's path, offering eager audiences insights to the keys of success, including Steven R. Covey's (1989) wildly popular *Seven Habits for Highly Effective People*. Key to these self-help management moments is the idea that individuals in the corporate world can achieve success by engaging in a process of self-managed self-improvement. In a 1997 article in the trendy management magazine *Fast Company*, however, influential management guru Tom Peters gave a name to the next self-help management movement: *personal branding*.

In many respects, the phenomenon of personal branding shares affinities with the self-help movements it drew from by offering a programmatic set of strategies for individuals to improve their chances at business success. But despite these continuities, the personal branding movement also represents something of a radical departure from previous self-help movements. Rather than focusing on self-*improvement* as the means to achievement, personal branding seems to suggest that the road to success is found instead in explicit self-*packaging*: Here, success is not determined by individuals' internal sets of skills, motivations, and interests but, rather, by how effectively they are arranged, crystallized, and labeled—in other words, branded.[1]

Branding itself is not a new concept or set of practices, although its uses have clearly reached new levels of market penetration in recent years. Branding of some sort has been evident in product development and promotion since the mid-19th century with the linkage of certain stores and factories to particular products through print advertising. In this article, we define branding as a programmatic approach to the selling of a product, service, organization, cause, or person that is fashioned as a proactive response to the emerging desires of a target audience or market (see Cheney & Christensen, 2001). In personal branding, the concepts of product development and promotion are used to market persons for entry into or transition within the labor market.

These concepts cover a variety of personal branding practices ranging from concrete branding products such as the personal advertisement brochures (which resemble, in many respects, the slick promotional materials sent by colleges and universities to prospective students) offered by Peter Montoya (n.d.) to the more expansive packaging of a *total* identity such as Genece Hamby's "Personal Branding D.N.A.," which asks individuals to project concise and coherent identities based on the questions, "What is unique about you and *distinguishable*?"; "What is remarkable and *notable* about you?" and "What is genuinely real and *authentic* about you?" (Hamby, n.d.).[2] Although the use of such strategies for self-promotion in the business world is certainly nothing new, personal branding as a movement broadens their impact by turning branding from a simple business tactic into an ideological understanding of the corporate world capable of an embracing influence over workers' very sense of self.

As a trend in popular management and employment consultation, personal branding appears to be enjoying a surge in popularity. A keyword search for the term *personal branding* yields books, magazines, web sites, training programs, personal coaches, and specialized literature about how exactly to brand yourself for success in the business world. At face value, these various resources promise their consumers an appealing, proven strategy to negotiate the chaotic employment environment around them. However, because personal branding offers such a startlingly overt invi-

tation to self-commodification, the phenomenon invites deeper examination.

This essay offers such a critical-empirical interrogation of the personal branding movement centered around four questions: (a) How has the personal branding movement positioned itself as a sociocultural institution? (b) What are the principal rhetorical strategies and appeals of the personal branding movement? (c) What are the cultural biases and constraints of personal branding, particularly regarding gender, race, class, and age—both for the individual self and for the larger society? and (d) What are the ethical implications and limitations of personal branding? Addressing these questions is the primary purpose of this essay.

In answering the four questions above, we consider both the expressed motives for the personal branding movement as well as its implications. Our analysis in this essay is centered on the discourse of the personal branding movement: We make no claims regarding the measurable effects of this discourse or as to how such discourse is taken up by its audiences. Instead, we are concerned here by the *potential* identifications invited by personal branding discourse and the limitations of those identifications should they be adopted by audiences uncritically. We start by examining parallel developments in contemporary communication and employment climates and exploring how personal branding arises as a rhetorically fitting response. We then trace the contours of the personal branding movement and emphasize the rhetorical tactics with which it responds to increasingly complex communication and employment environments. Next, we examine personal branding with a critical eye to both its effects on individuals and the power relations it instantiates on the basis of social categories such as gender, age, race, and class. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the broader ethical implications of personal branding as a communication strategy. In doing so, we suggest that personal branding is more than a simple and necessary strategy for individuals to negotiate a turbulent economic environment; it also carries with it long-range and potentially damaging implications, unanticipated and unacknowledged by its proponents and practitioners, as it promotes a vision of the working self that is superficial at best, devoid of opportunities for self-reflection and improvement.

POSITIONING PERSONAL BRANDING

Personal branding emerged as a movement in the late 1990s at a time when observers of both the corporate communication and employment worlds were making similar but largely independent observations about the increasingly complex and chaotic nature of each environment. Personal branding, however, connected these developments in practice where they had not been in theory by positioning itself as a communicative response to an economic situation and allowing its practitioners to stand out both as communicators and (prospective) employees. In this section, then, we trace the parallel developments of the contemporary communication and employment environments to illustrate the unique position of personal branding as a sociocultural institution to respond simultaneously to both of these trends.

THE CONTEMPORARY CORPORATE
COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT

The organizational environment of the late 20th and early 21st century is marked by turbulence spurred by economic globalization, new arenas of competition, and rapidly evolving information technologies (March, 1995). As Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, and Lair (2004) observed, that turbulence is often framed in explicitly communicative terms. The common narrative is that an ever-increasing number of messages in the corporate communication climate demands increasingly innovative communication strategies for organizations to stand out (cf. Blythe, 2000; Ries & Trout, 1981; Schultz, Tannebaum, & Lauterborn, 1994). Paradoxically, communication emerges as both the cause of and the solution to the crowded corporate communication environment. The history of branding as a corporate communication strategy is but a microcosm of this overall development.

Although the metaphor of branding derives from the designated ownership of livestock, in the world of corporate communications, it represents an attempt to make direct, clear, and persistent bonds between symbols and products or services. As a communication strategy, branding is most traditionally associated with consumer

products. The idea of a consumer brand emerged in the late 19th century, and consumer branding—the association of consumer products with a readily identifiable brand name—enjoyed its heyday from approximately 1920 to 1970. Here, advertising focused on mundane, primarily household-related, consumer products targeted especially at housewives (Olins, 2000). Brand products were marketed as *unique* goods able to provide *unique* advantages to consumers; it was the brand name that distinguished a product—for example, Spic'N'Span—from other household cleaners.

The 1970s and 1980s, however, saw increased competition in an expanding market, both for consumer products themselves and the media through which they were marketed. The advent of cable television in particular posed new challenges as well as opportunities for branding as a communication strategy, because television now addressed broader audience groups (e.g., CNN's global audience by the 1990s) and audiences organized around more specific interests (e.g., Lifetime, Animal Planet, and Outdoor Life networks). The result of this simultaneous expansion and fragmenting of audiences was the elevation of branding's importance as a communication strategy in navigating a crowded market. As Christensen and Cheney (2000) observed, "The market of today seems to be demanding well-crafted identities, identities that are able to stand out and break through the clutter" (p. 246). Because branding is so well suited to present images as identity, branding as a strategy has become increasingly important as a flexible response to a crowded communication world.

This flexibility has driven the evolution of branding as a communication strategy in several important ways. According to Olins (2000), consumer brands are no longer primarily associated with products; now brands represent services, too. In fact, service brands appear to be more innovative than many product brands and are becoming increasingly dominant. Consider, for example, the widening array of personalized services—including even personal shoppers—who bill themselves as able to handle the personal demands of an affluent but extemely busy client. Olins also observed that brands are now promoted in increasingly varied and complex ways. Although conventional advertising through paid media maintains a strong strategic presence, multimedia promotion involving e-commerce is becoming more and more common and

promises in some cases to become the lead medium of branding. In some instances, the preparation of the market before the product arrives effectively creates a consumer frenzy for the label/commodity, as was the case in mid-2004 with the anticipation of the last episode of the popular TV program *Friends*. Finally, economic and cultural forms of globalization have led to the growth of major worldwide brands, an overall decline in the number of brands, and a growing flexibility in the use of brands.

In addition to consumer branding, types of branding include retail brands, product brands, corporate brands (Olins, 2000), and, we would add, *personal* brands. With retail brands, retail corporations have begun to cash in on their brand name by selling products that go far beyond what they are traditionally known for. Thus, Costco and Safeway sell gasoline, Super Wal-Mart sells tires and lettuce under the same roof, and AT&T sells Internet access and cable television. As corporations diversify their product lines, they must deliberately create differences between their own internal brands to project product brands. So, for example, Toyota markets its non-Toyota-identified Lexus brand to consumers in markets similar to other high-end Toyota models. Corporate brands represent the growing efforts of corporations at branding themselves somewhat independently of their product lines. Nike is perhaps the example par excellence of a corporate brand, offering advertisements that promote only the corporate name and logo with no association to a specific product. In branding themselves, corporations seek to (a) project an image of unity to various stakeholders and (b) unify multiple brands under one umbrella brand.

The phenomenon of personal brands represents the logical extension of these previous brand forms. Increasingly, celebrities are cashing in on name recognition to brand themselves: In the late 1990s, David Bowie's initial public offering in "Bowie Bonds" raised $55 million, and James Brown sold $30 million worth of stock in his future earnings (Peters, 1999). In fact, celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, and Madonna serve as the primary examples held up by Peters (1999), Montoya (n.d.), and other consultants to demonstrate the efficacy of personal branding. As these celebrity examples are offered as lessons to the lives of ordinary professionals, they speak to a long history of professional packaging movements: Carnegie's (1936/1982) *How to Win*

Friends and Influence People, first published in 1937; the 1970s "Dress for Success" movement; and *Games Mother Never Taught You* (Harragan, 1977), to name a few that promise to give individuals control over their own economic destiny by shaping the package they present to others.

The marketing culture has matured at the same time that the communication explosion (or *im*plosion) has begun to encounter its own logical limits (Baudrillard, 1988; Belch & Belch, 1998; Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Ewen, 1988; Fill, 1999; Laufer & Paradeise, 1990). That is to say, the society of symbols has become so cluttered and the juxtapositioning of different signs so rampant that the sheer cry for attention (see Davenport & Beck, 2001) becomes the a priori aim of any media, advertising, or public relations campaign. In a symbolic environment where arguments are made through apparently novel linkages between symbols, ethos is recast in transitory terms (Cheney, 2004). For what is credible, really, is what is appealing at a particular moment: The standing of a product, brand, or political candidate, no matter how much it rests on tradition, can be undermined at any time if the new alignment of symbols (style, spectacle, scandal, whatever) is no longer in its favor (Baudrillard, 2000).

Branding itself may be seen within this broader communicative and cultural context. 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. In a way, this development represents the ultimate marriage of marketing culture with the mythos of the American individual: In a world of change and opportunity, you can create and recreate yourself so as to be the master of your own destiny. In addition, personal branding carries the elevation of image over substance one step further: The world of appearance is not only articulated and accepted, it is valorized and held up as the only reasonable way to negotiate the contemporary world of work and professions. In short, the personal branding movement positions workers as irrational when they attempt to preserve and promote what they experience as their true or authentic selves. Personal branding, then, promotes a hyper-individuality based on a lack of deeper identity and self-awareness.

THE CONTEMPORARY
EMPLOYMENT CLIMATE

The major economic shifts in the industrial world since the mid-1980s have been well documented (V. Smith, 1997, 2001). Significant trends include the widespread privatization of public services, corporate mergers and consolidation of industries, technological replacement of many jobs, elimination of middle management in many firms, reduced labor costs through industrial relocation, disaggregation (or molecularization) of the organizational value chain (Tapscott, 1997), outsourcing of non-core functions, and team-based restructuring with a new emphasis on individual entrepreneurship. In some nations, notably the United States, there has also been a widening gap between the rich and the poor, an increase in the number of persons working two or three jobs, and a dramatic increase in the length of the work week (Schor, 1992, 2003). The transition from an industrial to an information-based economy has unquestionably produced dramatic upheavals in the social organization of work (Casey, 1995; Castells, 2000; V. Smith, 2001).

Work in the industrial economy was, in certain ways, far more stable; jobs were comparatively secure (i.e., for those who had them), retirement benefits were more reliably and readily available, and workers stayed with jobs and companies for extended periods of time. The twilight years of the 20th century, however, saw a transformation of these employment conditions (see Ackerman, Goodwin, Dougherty, & Gallagher, 1998). Work became much less stable as companies such as IBM—famous for their promise of life-long employment—began to lay off large numbers of workers for the first time in their history (see Sennett, 1998); benefits packages shrunk; available jobs were increasingly located in low-paying, part-time service sectors (Noyelle, 1990); and temporary and contract labor became increasingly prominent (V. Smith, 2001). In fact, temporary workers make up the fastest growing segment of the American workforce with Manpower one of the United States's largest employers (Zorn, Christensen, & Cheney, 1999). Contingent employment includes part-time, seasonal, episodic, contract-based, and so-called *temp* work and is characterized by (a) diminished or absent job security, (b) comparatively lower pay, (c) reduced or absent benefits, (d) lower status, and (e) minimal per-

sonal identification with the organization (Gossett, 2003). These disruptions leave workers working longer hours to make ends meet and worrying about the erosion of benefits (Sennett, 1998; V. Smith, 2001).

In the era of the information economy, not only do workers confront the traditional specter of unemployment, they also must navigate the increasing uncertainties of contemporary employment. Management fads such as downsizing, reengineering, and change for change's sake (e.g., see Hammer & Champy, 1993) have in certain ways ruptured the traditional relationship between corporate financial success and job security for many employees. Taken together, these trends create an employment environment that parallels the complexity of the contemporary corporate communication climate and, like that climate, places a high emphasis on standing out entrepreneurially as a prerequisite for success.

Unlike corporate efforts to stand out in the communication environment, however, standing out in the contemporary employment climate is an almost entirely individual affair. Casey (1995) argued that such structural dislocations, coupled with the increasingly specialized organization of work in the informational economy, have led to the erosion of traditional social identifications along lines such as class. The effect of this individualization of workers is the privileging of worker *agency* (V. Smith, 2001). Workers are encouraged to view themselves as entrepreneurs within corporate employment or while seeking corporate employment. Accordingly, workers often view themselves as responsible for job loss or job dissatisfaction, even when they know that larger social forces are primarily responsible for casting their lot (cf. Sennett, 1998). This tension is problematic for workers, for even though work becomes increasingly decentered and unstable, work remains a primary source of individual identity (Casey, 1995).

The notion of a career is not new. It was well established by the time Weber (1978) was observing the careers of public servants at the turn of the 20th century. For him, the idea of a career, especially in a public-sector organization, involved commitment to the value of fairness, grounding in technical expertise, and aspirations toward the public good. In this way, Weber did not fear but, rather, trusted the dedicated and experienced bureaucrat. It was in the temptation to elevate formal over substantive rationality in the per-

formance of a job in any sector that vexed Weber. That is to say, he wanted bureaucracies to somehow avoid what he saw as an almost inevitable turn toward the calculation of narrow means rather than maintaining a fix on important ends (such as the public good or the manufacture of an excellent product). For Weber, as for Durkheim (1964, 1996) and other observers of what we now consider to be modern industrial society, the notion of a career is distinctly social and not something held or pursued only by individuals. Weber's career person may have become narrowly preoccupied, but she was not self-centered.[3]

In scholarly as well as popular writings on the career, the concept has become noticeably desocialized. In fact, it can be argued that career is seldom associated today with anything other than individual choice, pursuit, and possession, even though any individual's career may certainly have a social or societal orientation. In the United States especially, but also in a number of other Western industrialized nations, the career is a more vaunted idea than "just a job"; it is also an increasingly portable holding by a person—an intangible marker of identity that individuals may carry from job to job, from organization to organization. For the individual career person, the career is something serious and suggestive of identity (Clair, 1996). Finally, the prevailing root metaphor for career in the United States is undoubtedly linear, as crystallized in the term *the career ladder* (Buzzanell & Goldzwig, 1991). So powerful is this root metaphor—often made explicit in everyday discourse—that flat careers, career cycles, or dual ladders are often inconceivable, thereby leading people to question as unorthodox or simply crazy decisions not to accept promotions, transfers, and other options for advancement. Thus, although the career is de facto commodified as something the individual carries with him from organization to organization and city to city, its interpretation is shaped by powerful social norms and pressures. In the era of late industrial capitalism, those very norms and pressures have become increasingly unstable.

Within this arena of trends, *entrepreneurship* (du Gay, 1996) became a buzzword in the late 1980s; today it continues to serve as a center of mythic energy. Originally used to refer to small enterprises launched by creative and resourceful individuals, entrepreneurship gradually came to symbolize the aggressive and dedicated

performance of employees of established firms as well as capturing an approach to specific projects. As du Gay (1996) explained, we have reimagined our lives as an enterprise with the individual responsible for managing that enterprise and the language of entrepreneurship (rather than bureaucratic management) being central to how that enterprise is conceptualized and managed.

The personal branding movement to some extent relies upon the image of an independent, resourceful, creative, and aggressive professional. This person is expected to be agile in a fluctuating job market, responsive to any opportunities, self-motivating, and self-promoting. As we will see in our analysis of books, web sites, and seminars related to personal branding, the movement treats society and work chiefly at the individual level. This cosmology (if you will) does not presume that everyone can be effective at personal branding, but it does try to foster an implicit identification with a fairly large segment of educated, experienced professionals who, for one reason or another, are at a juncture in their career path. Against this backdrop of destabilized work conditions, personal branding emphasizes control over one's work identity as the primary solution to structural uncertainties in the work economy. In that regard, it will be important to observe the extent to which personal branding extends to a range of jobs not typically considered professional but nevertheless subject to packaging.

RESPONDING TO COMPLEXITY: THE EMERGENCE OF PERSONAL BRANDING

The popularization of personal branding is generally attributed to Peters's (1997) article in *Fast Company*, entitled "The Brand Called You" (cf. Diekmeyer, 1999), although Montoya (n.d.), the other of personal branding's two most prominent proponents, also lays claim to pioneering the concept in 1997. In the years since the idea of personal branding was first popularized, a virtual personal branding industry has blossomed. At least 15 popular management books were explicitly devoted to the topic from 1997 to 2004; many more incorporate the issue as a part of a more general discussion of branding in the contemporary marketplace (Tamsevicius, n.d.). A

web search reveals dozens of web pages of consultants offering or specializing in personal branding services. Montoya has even issued *Personal Branding*, a quarterly magazine devoted to the topic.

In this essay, we examine a representative sample of personal branding texts from a variety of sources. Although our focus is on the most prominent and widely referenced texts in personal branding discourse, we also analyze representations of personal branding on the web sites of prominent individual consultants. Thus, we read a diverse collection of personal branding texts ranging from popular books such as Peters's (1999) *The Brand You 50* and Robin Fisher-Roffer's (2000) *Make a Name for Yourself* to promotional literature for Peter Montoya, Inc., the most prominent personal branding consultancy, to several web sites of other consultants offering personal branding services. Our purpose in collecting these texts is not to offer a comprehensive survey of personal branding discourse but, rather, to offer a fair representation of the various themes and issues presented in that discourse from a variety of sources. (In fact, we did find the same relatively small set of names of consultants and writers in this area to be recurring across the variety of texts and artifacts we surveyed.) We feel that such an approach is well suited to our analysis: the personal branding literature, regardless of its source, displays remarkably similar themes across authors and contexts.

THE RHETORICAL APPEAL(S) OF PERSONAL BRANDING

At its most general level, the rhetoric of personal branding encourages and endorses the process of turning oneself into a product—in effect, engaging in self-commodification. This call to self-commodification is the common denominator across the personal branding literature. Peters (1999), for example, continually exhorted employees to conceive of themselves as products:

> I am as good as my last-next gig. (p. 5)
> Survivors will "be" a product . . . and exhibit clear cut distinction at . . . something. (p. 9)

> I *AM* MY PROJECTS. (p. 41)
>
> Everybody *is* a package. ("He's a ball of fire." "She's a pistol." "He's the biggest bore I've ever met.") The trick for Brand You is making sure you control your package and the message it sends. (p. 46)

Other consultants and personal branding advocates echo similar calls. For example, William Arruda of Reach Communications Consultancy argued, "Gone are the days where your value to your company or clients is from your offerings alone. Today, people want to buy brands–unique promises of value" (Arruda, 2002, p. 5). Similarly, Jan Austin (n.d.) encouraged clients to view themselves as products rather than people who actively sell products, observing, "Branding makes people, products and services 'easy to buy' because brands operate like magnets. Wouldn't you rather be a magnet that attracts business than someone who sells?" (¶ 5). Arruda, Austin, Peters, and others all frame the idea of personal branding in a fashion that at least implicitly recalls the unique selling proposition (Olins, 2000) of more traditional forms of branding by encouraging individuals to discover and develop their unique qualities as a product and use those qualities as selling points.

Although such statements treat the individual as unique, they do so only on a superficial level. Peters presents Brand You as a veneer of individuality standing in for the real thing. Phillipson (2002) summed up this process:

> Peters' latest book [*Brand You 50*] is a blatant call to transform the self into an instrumental object that is constituted and directed by the market. It fundamentally eschews a self that longs for true recognition and acceptance. Instead, it places a premium on those of us who can shift our needs and personae to accommodate the twists and turns of today's economy. (p. 99)

The model of power exhibited in personal branding discourse's call to self-commodification is a different brand of power than the overt commodification-as-domination thesis offered by Marx (1867/1967). Instead, discourses such as personal branding invite individuals to consent to their own self-packaging all the while celebrating their sense of personal efficacy. To the extent that this process and the associated discourses rise up from and contribute to a larger cul-

tural milieu, personal branding may be seen in terms of the two-sided process of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). Participants are not cultural dupes, but neither are they as free as the rhetoric of the genre in which they indulge would assume (cf. Mumby, 1997).

Employees are encouraged to buy into the personal branding discourse with three strands of argument working together to create a unified vision of personal branding as the perfect solution to a turbulent economic environment. Peters (1999) captured these themes in identifying the general ethos of personal branding:

> The point of this book series:
>   (1) TAKE YOUR/MY LIFE BACK FROM "THEM." (2) SCREW DILBERT: CYNICISM IS FOR WHINERS. (3) SELF-RELIANCE IS ALL AMERICAN. (p. 34)

Peters's remarks exhibit the general tenor of the personal branding discourse. Specifically, the themes sounded by Peters—and the legions of other consultants advocating personal branding—meld together a series of arguments about personal branding as inevitable, as inextricably linked with the American mythos, and as positive or upbeat—a rejection of both cynicism and resignation. We treat each of these themes briefly in turn.

Conveying inevitability. Peters (1999) and others argue that—like it or not—personal branding represents the only way to survive economic dislocations. The argument goes that, because the economic environment is out of the control of the individual, the individual must be ready to respond to that turbulence. Peters, for instance, argued that "IT IS THE NEW MILLENIUM. YOU CANNOT STAND ON A PAT HAND. PERIOD. . . . Unless you've got a trust fund up your sleeve, this radical reinvention of yourself . . . into Brand You . . . is a necessity!" (p. 23). Similarly, personal brand strategist and coach Catherine Kaputa (n.d.) claimed that "there is no security in a job, any job, unless you add value to what the company does, or add value to what the customer gets for his money" (¶ 22). For Kaputa and others, a personal brand is the method by which one demonstrates their ability to add value to the company thus providing oneself with at least some degree of security. Taking control of your own success and security in a turbulent economy

through the development of a personal brand becomes even more urgent as personal branding becomes more popular. Reach Communications Consultancy explicitly advances this argument on its web site, arguing,

> It is only a matter of time before your peers or competitors jump on the "brandwagon." So uncovering, building and nurturing your brand now will ensure that you get out in front of the pack and experience professional success beyond your dreams. (*1-2-3 Success!*, n.d., ¶ 4)

Thus, personal branding attempts to guarantee its success through a cycle of inevitability: Economic turmoil is inevitable; personal branding is the solution; others will brand themselves; therefore, you *must* brand yourself to succeed. Consultant Jan Austin captures this personal branding imperative well on her web site with the admonishment that "everyone must learn to use unconventional methods in order to stand out and command the attention of one's audience. *YOU MUST BE A BRAND*!" (Austin, n.d., ¶ 1).

The root metaphor of much of this advice, as in most advertising for technology, is that of a race that must be run. The fear is constantly of falling behind or not being able to catch up.

The American mythos. The highly individualistic nature of personal branding resonates strongly with the by-your-own-bootstrap mythos that has historically played a central role in American culture in general and American business culture in particular, as well as with the neoliberal economic philosophy that has become so prominent for many Western governments. In this manner, personal branding speaks into the long-standing presupposition—perhaps most famously articulated in Horatio Alger's (1990) 19th-century novel, *Ragged Dick*—that a strong work ethic, centered on individual initiative, is the key to realizing the American dream. The personal branding literature consistently positions individuals as responsible for charting their own futures. Kaputa (n.d.), for example, played on the bootstrap theme by writing on her web site that "self branders establish the greatest freedom, which is responsibility. Self branders make their own luck [and] create their own opportunities. Self-branders are always working for themselves,

even when they are working for a boss" (¶ 24). Not only does Kaputa draw on American notions of self-reliance, but she also connects such self-reliance to the equally American celebration of freedom.

Such connections are common from personal branding consultants; often, the turbulent economic environment is portrayed as a uniquely exciting venue to exercise Americanism. Nowhere is this connection more striking, however, than in Peters's (1999) explicit connection of personal branding to the American mythos:

> America has always been the *Self-Help* Nation. *Bootstrap* Nation. *Pioneer* Nation. In the early years of our democracy, everybody provided for themselves and their families (and their neighbors in times of need). Nobody expected to be taken care of. Self-reliance, independence, and the freedom that goes with them were what we stood for, what defined us. And then, about 150 years ago, when Giant Corp. arrived on the scene (Giant Govt. came about 75 years later), we started to lose "it." Our Franklinian "it." Our Emersonian "it." We succumbed—exactly the right word—to Babbitry. To Big. Corp.-That-Will-Be-Mummy-and-Daddy-for-Life. (p. 14)

Here, Peters positions personal branding not only as a highly American phenomenon but also as one that restores traditional American values lost in the era of Whyte's (1956) *Organization Man*. Personal branding is desirable because it affords individuals a strategy to negotiate a turbulent economy and it recaptures the ideals of self-reliance and self-sufficiency embodied in American icons such as Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Horatio Alger.

Disidentifying with cynicism. Finally, the arguments for personal branding are unassailable within the walls of Brand You: to attack the idea is to be cynical; and to be cynical is to throw your hands up and take what the economy gives you. Peters (1997, 1999) repeatedly railed against cynicism, often using Dilbert cartoons as a target of his ire:

> We want (desperately) an anti-Dilbert character. (I love Dilbert. He's right. He's funny. But I hate the cynicism, except as a wake-up call. It's my life, and I'll not spend it pushing paper in some crummy cubicle. And you?) (1999, p. 39)

Other consultants similarly frame personal branding as a positive, solution-oriented effort. Kaputa (n.d.), for example, argued that "acting like a self brand arises out of the decision that you want to take control and that there is more to do. You want to be part of the solution, not complaining about the problem" (¶ 23). Personal branding advocates consistently stress a positive outlook consistent with both the portrayal of economic turmoil as inevitable and the call to American-style self-reliance: To give in to the turbulence is to accept defeat; to lose faith in one's ability to succeed is to give up on the American dream. Cynicism, then, is not an option; it can only prevent one from succeeding. Instead, personal branding encourages individuals to embrace the challenge of the contemporary economy by using personal branding as a strategy to succeed, leaving the cynics behind to have their situations dictated to them by the whims of the economy.

Taken together, each of these general appeals works to form an interlocking series of arguments insulating personal branding from criticism. Personal branding proponents demonstrate an awareness of the potential criticisms of personal branding and attempt to dismiss them outright. For example, Peters (1999) wrote, "I don't know about you, but I don't feel in the least bit offended, demeaned, or dehumanized by the thought of Brand You or Brand Me. Or Me Inc., another of my favorites" (p. 26). Similarly, Montoya (n.d.) argued, "A Personal Brand is not you; it's the public projection of your personality and abilities. That doesn't mean you are losing 'you the person'; it does mean you are shaping the perception people have of 'you the person'" (¶ 1). Each of these defenses of personal branding is in fact bolstered by the circularity of the arguments above: Professionals should not feel guilty about branding themselves, because branding is a necessary response to inevitable economic turmoil and a very American response in terms of the celebration of individual enterprise. And, after all, any criticism of the strategy is just plain cynical. In effect, then, these arguments work together to close in on the discursive space necessary to resist the encroachment of branding discourse into deeper issues of personal and professional identity. We would characterize this argumentative containment as a prime example of what Deetz

(1992) termed *discursive closure,* referring to the control of communication where alternatives to the dominant position scarcely have a chance to be heard.

Personal branding is by its very design reductionistic because of its style of expression. Also, it diverts attention from what Weber (1978) would have called more substantive aspects of individual rationality and identity and toward superficial and technically executed representations. Weber was certainly aware of the power of representation in his interpretive sociology of organizations; in fact, he accorded organizational images a certain reality when people acted as if those images were important. On the other hand, Weber was deeply concerned that modern rationality would play out in such a way as to obscure penetrating questions about values, identity, and decision making. This was a concern for organizations as well as individuals. Although we are certainly not suggesting a sharp line between substance and representation (see Burke, 1945/1969), we do observe ways in which one's identity (and role performances) can be represented in more or less reductionistic ways. Reduction, as Burke (1945/1969) observed, is a type of representation and, in his way of thinking, an expression of motives. But just as the representation can stand for the thing represented, so can the thing represented stand for the representation. So, the real questions become the following: What sort of symbolic equation are we favoring by using personal brands? What does brand identification highlight? Obscure or conceal? Ultimately, in this case, one can choose (or not choose) to surrender identity projections to the fleeting dictates of fashion.

With personal branding, the rhetorical adjustment of the self to the whims of management and how-to trends becomes not only a strategic activity one has to do but what one actively pursues as a personal goal—at least if we take the web sites of personal branding consultants seriously. Personal branding offers itself as a proactive, personal option and in some ways, it is. But it also suffers from the constraints of an overpackaged, time-bound genre of self-expression that scarcely asks for much self-reflection. Indeed, personal branding leaves little room for audiences to experience authentic selves (or in Burke's, 1945/1969, terms, multiple "motives").

THE CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS OF
PERSONAL BRANDING

PERSONAL BRANDING'S IMPLIED
MODEL OF WORK AND LIFE

Once one steps outside of the circular arguments with which personal branding insulates itself from criticism, the unintended consequences of the strategy become apparent. In addition to (or perhaps because of) persuading employees to turn themselves into saleable commodities, the personal branding discourse underscores several ongoing social pathologies including overwork and the erosion of personal relationships.

Certainly, the by-your-own-bootstrap themes echoed by personal branding consultants call on individuals to stand out from their competitors through hard work. Unfortunately, hard work is often defined in quantitative rather than qualitative terms. Psychologist Phillipson, in her recent book *Married to the Job* (2002), drew an explicit connection between the Peters's (1999) ideological stance toward work and the pathological role that work plays in the lives of her patients. Phillipson offered a unique and compelling argument that our obsession with work is due not only (or even primarily) to our drive for consumption (cf. Schor, 1992) but, rather, to the fact that work increasingly provides the emotional connections that we lack in our (post)modern lives. Framing work through personal branding seems to strengthen the forces driving the dramatic increase in the American workweek at a time when some other industrialized nations are decreasing their working hours.

Time spent is a zero-sum game. If we spend more time working, we spend less elsewhere. Phillipson (2002) certainly saw this connection in her patients. But personal branding's effects on relationships threaten to be more direct by calling for the worker to sacrifice family and relationships in the interests of developing and maintaining Brand You. Peters (1999), for example, wrote,

> If Brand You is about your signature WOW Projects . . . and it is . . .
> then you must somehow (consult the Time Management gurus)
> weed out the 96(*!*) percent of distractions . . . and Work-the-Hell-
> Out-of-Your-Signature-WOW Project (come Bloody Hell *and*
> Bloody High Water). We all know folks who are going to . . . start a
> business . . . write a book . . . learn to skydive . . . build a house . . . as
> soon as they "find the time." *BULLSHIT!* When you CARE you
> MAKE the time . . . and if that means saying "NO!" to your friends,
> your spouse, your kids (hey, I never said there would be no sacri-
> fices), well, there it is!
>
> (When I'm at work on a book—i.e., now—I am unspeakably
> rude to friends, family, colleagues. Sometimes correspondence
> goes unanswered for a . . . year. And far too many Little League
> games have been missed. And Mom has gone far too long without a
> phone call. Etc. Fact is: I don't know how else to do it?! And there
> may well be no other way?) (p. 72)

Here, Peters calls for individuals to place their brands above their
relationships. Other consultants take the idea of branding even fur-
ther by arguing that personal branding as a strategy should be
imported into relationships to save them. Consultant Chuck Pettis
(n.d.), for example, relayed the narrative of one of his clients to
make this point: "Will theorized that 'Branding works for our cli-
ents, why won't it work for me and help me 'sell' my 'product' (i.e.,
me) to my 'customer' (i.e., my wife?)'" (¶ 11). The discourse of per-
sonal branding, then, threatens to either lead people to ignore their
relationships or to commodify such relationships within the frame
of a market discourse.

Certainly, areas of personal life beyond time and relationships
are jeopardized by the incursion of branding discourse into issues
of personal identity. In this essay, however, we would like to focus
our attention on personal branding's implications for broader so-
cial issues revolving around dimensions such as gender, race, age,
and class.

We will develop the gender-based analysis in some detail be-
cause of gender's obvious presence in the texts under study. With
race, age, and class, we wish to make parallel observations in terms
of their potent absence from the discourses of personal branding.

GENDER-BASED LIMITATIONS TO PERSONAL BRANDING'S IDENTITY MANAGEMENT

Personal branding has the potential to objectify all workers; however, for women, the concept of personal branding may be even more problematic than for their male counterparts. In particular, personal branding promotes a feminine surface identity and a masculine internal identity, all the while perpetuating the work/home dualism. Personal branding encourages women to get ahead at work, work as hard or harder than their male counterparts, and reach for the top but also to look womanly, take care of their external appearance, be there for their children and husbands (if a woman has them—but recognize that if she does, she may not be viewed as a 100% company woman), and routinely act in the caretaker role at work.

Although women are urged to adopt the external appearance of culturally defined femininity, the personal branding literature also insists that women internally deny that same feminine identity. Since the 1970s, books about organizations such as *Games Mother Never Taught You: Corporate Gamesmanship for Women* (Harragan, 1977) and *The New Executive Women: A Guide to Business Success* (Williams, 1977) have been telling women that to succeed in industry, they must diminish the feminine and embody the masculine—but not on the *outside*, of course! The message is that femininity is deficient when it comes to organizational success and that, to succeed, women need to adopt particular strategies to deny the feminine. Personal branding sends the same message but in a much more covert manner. The danger for working women who buy into personal branding lies in what personal branding rules out while offering the appearance of empowerment.

An example of this can be seen in Fisher-Roffer's (2000) *Make a Name for Yourself: 8 Steps Every Woman Needs to Create a Personal Brand Strategy for Success*. Fisher-Roffer's book, a prominent text in the personal branding literature, explicitly takes the personal branding concept into a gendered context thus affording an excellent window into the gender-based implications of personal branding discourse. Fisher-Roffer claimed she targets women because "I haven't found many [books] that resonate with a

woman's emotional experience in striving to get ahead in work" (p. 8), going on to claim that:

> Building a personal brand strategy allows us to wield our truest selves. Instead of an assault on the marketplace, we come bearing the gift of our own best qualities, packaged in a way to attract precisely the people who need us, and want us, and will appreciate us the most. (Fisher-Roffer, 2000, p. 8)

Although at first glance such statements seem relatively innocuous, a closer examination of the ways in which women are asked to brand themselves proves to be problematic. Women fight against the stereotype of being a sex object in the workplace (Wood, 2001). Fisher-Roffer did not say that women should attempt to be sex objects, but her book does contain an entire chapter on how to package your brand, complete with hair, make-up, nail color, and clothing tips. Fisher-Roffer also makes more difficult the very real work-home dualism that many women face (Hochschild, 1989). Personal branding exacerbates the problem by simultaneously telling women that they need to act like a brand, be indispensable to their organization, handle every situation, network with the higher ups, and at the same time "be the good girl scout" and have a backup plan for their children's crises (Fisher-Roffer, 2000, p. 101).

Fisher-Roffer (2000) is just one example of how personal branding strategists target working women to make them feel as though they have no other option to get ahead than to brand themselves. Hamby (n.d.) explicitly targeted women by equating personal branding to a marriage. She claimed that you have to treat your brand like a marriage giving it your "unique strengths, values and talents." If you don't give your brand everything you've got, that you will inevitably go through a "brand divorce." Brand divorce, Hamby argued, occurs when women do not give their all to their personal brand and do not accept that fact that "the reality is that we are each responsible for our own business succeeding or not" (n.d., ¶ 7). Hamby places the burden of success squarely on the shoulders of women and tells them that failure is because of their own flaws and mistakes. Similarly, personal branding strategist and coach Kaputa (n.d.) offers a specialized seminar on personal branding for women. Kaputa claims that in this seminar, women will learn to

"break through the glass ceiling through effective self branding. Women will learn to look at themselves as a marketer would look at a product that she wants to make a winning brand" (n.d., ¶ 1). Once again, women are asked to perceive themselves as products, and to do it willingly and happily, in order to get ahead.

The discourse of personal branding, then, carries with it particularly troublesome gender implications by simultaneously suggesting women feel as though they need to brand themselves to get ahead while at the same time making them feel individually responsible for failure, thus effectively placing women in a discursive double bind. Brands connote consistency of roles, a promise of success, and a standard mode of operation—a daunting task for any human being to achieve. In their double role, working women with families are at risk of suffering an even greater work-home tension by committing themselves to becoming a brand.

AGE, RACE, AND CLASS IN PERSONAL BRANDING

Personal branding treats race, age, and class in a similar manner by excluding them from conversations of who is allowed to succeed through personal branding. An article found on Latinoforum.com (*Personal Branding Books*, 2003), stated,

> It's not clear that everyone can or even should be branded, however. Speak, for example, finds it easiest to teach personal branding techniques to corporate employees; other consultants prefer to work with self-employed entrepreneurs. Montoya, for his part, doubts that everyone has the ability to do the soul searching required to become a brand. Although he feels that the ability to look at oneself honestly and openly is the most powerful and important skill in becoming a good personal brand, he says, "Some people have it and some people don't. I'm not sure if it's something that can be learned or not." (¶ 13)

We would agree that personal branding does not appear to be for everyone, nor does it send the message that it is. Personal branding, by the language it uses, the depictions of those who use personal branding on promotional materials, and the implicit absence of any

discussion of difference, tells us who can be a brand and who cannot. The message of personal branding is problematic for workers in general, but it poses additional problems for workers who fall outside the realm of a White, middle-aged professional.

Age is one aspect that personal branding either ignores or views as a downfall to personal branding. Bergstrom and Holmes (2003) observed that the U.S. labor force will dramatically grey as the number of workers aged 55 to 64 increases by 11.3 million by 2010. The necessity and/or desire of many workers to remain in the workforce longer is often met with resistance, as older workers continue to face discrimination in the face of evidence that demonstrates that they are equally competent on the job (Bergstrom & Holmes, 2003). When older workers apply for jobs, they may run into discriminatory hiring practices; when struggling to stay in their current jobs, they may run into obstacles as well.

Personal branding, for the most part, rarely mentions the unique difficulties faced by the older working population; however, one example stands out. Kaputa (n.d.), a self-described company and personal branding strategy coach, has developed a personal branding seminar specifically for the 50+ market. In this seminar, Kaputa explains why the self-brand concept is crucial for people older than 50. Personal branding asks older workers to turn themselves into products to secure or maintain employment. Older workers are told to "reinvent themselves" for the "second act" when they should be experts in the "first act" (Kaputa, n.d.). From the perspective of personal branding, then, the experience and expertise that come from years of work are beneficial only to the extent that they can be branded as a marketable commodity.

Although age has at least one mention in the current personal branding literature, race does not. We have not found discussions of race, whether in books, on the Internet, in articles, or in marketing materials such as newsletters and brochures. A thorough examination of personal branding web sites and promotional materials revealed only two web sites that had pictures of people whose race was other than White; in all of the pictures, older workers and non-white-collar-looking workers were absent. In short, the literature of personal branding is overwhelmingly silent on the issue of race. The only non-White personal branding consultant we found was Stedman Graham, author of the personal branding book, *Build*

Your Own Life Brand (2001). Graham is probably best known for his long-time association with Oprah Winfrey and Graham frequently mentions Oprah as a model in his prescription for personal branding.

The racial blindness of personal branding speaks to the larger racial blindness apparent in organizational studies within the United States. Cheney and Ashcraft (2003) claimed that "organizational communication scholars have said much less about the racial dimensions of work than they have about gender dynamics" and urged "sustained attention to the racial division of labor, for we observe that the images of many professionals are coded for Whiteness, even when the intention to do so is below the surface of awareness" (p. 16). Personal branding appears to support the status quo image or brand, if you will, of the professional as largely White. Ashcraft and Allen (2003) have argued that if a person of color is admitted into the organization, they are expected to conform to the general practice of Whiteness to be viewed as a professional, whereas the white-collar worker is never asked to perform anything other than simply being White (i.e., culturally speaking). Personal branding not only helps to fix the idea of the White professional but also leaves little room for alternative identities.

As for issues of race, issues of class are largely ignored in the personal branding literature. The personal branding literature exhibits a marked absence of class awareness. Although this literature is certainly addressed to a white-collar audience, Peters (1999) framed that audience as "ninety-plus percent of us" (p. ix). Regardless of the accuracy of Peters's "fact," such a statement speaks volumes about the presumed applicability of personal branding as an employment strategy. This elitist perspective, with its implicit assumption that everyone is climbing the ladder, is blind to the limits on possibilities imposed by class positions. Consider, for example, the class differences implicit between the types of jobs available to those in Peters's Brand You world versus those jobs in the condemned Dilbert world (see the appendix). The assumptions behind these differences are predicated on a white-collar work world, presenting options that may not be available in the workplace for those whose jobs offer significantly less room for individual initiative and freedom.

The seemingly classless perspective advanced in personal branding discourse, then, functions as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it serves to recast the other side of the self-reliance-equals-success mythology—in effect, blaming the poor for poverty. By invoking the rags-to-riches Alger (1990) myth through its emphasis on the individual's ability to succeed if only they can find the right way to promote themselves, personal branding discourse leaves those who are economically marginalized as responsible for their own lot. Their economic failures become simply a result of their inability or unwillingness to package themselves correctly. Missing from this perspective, however, is how service workers—seemingly cast as white collar by Peters's reckoning—are to develop the skills and resources that they would need to market themselves; they certainly could not afford the $5,000 Fisher-Roffer charges for an initial three-hour personal branding consultation (Noxon, 2003).

The message is clear: If you're working in a Dilbert (low-paying service or technical) job, it is because you have not successfully branded yourself; it is no fault of your employer or broader structures or policies. If you are an older worker who is struggling with developing or keeping a career in the current employment climate, it is because you have not found a way to brand yourself for the "second act." And if you are not White you will have trouble finding a prefabricated seminar that seems to invite your ethnic identity. We believe that by ignoring issues of race, personal branding functions to keep the image of the White professional intact. The message is clear in its absence: Race does not appear to be a brandable characteristic.

CONCLUSION:
PERSONAL BRANDING, ETHICS,
AND COMMUNICATION

The broad tendency of personal branding is to shield itself from ethical scrutiny. This is in part because of the way it wraps itself in an upbeat celebration of democratic choice and opportunity—per

the ethos of marketing in general. As we will show, an ethically conscious rhetorical critique of the personal branding movement reveals the true limitations of the movement's claims regarding personal agency and efficacy. At the same time, the movement displays rather narrow conceptions of gender, race, and class. Finally, the movement can function to distort social relations through a further commodification of intersubjectivity. To develop in more specific terms our ethical critique, we would like to consider these four areas: the implied audience of personal branding, the implied individual person, the distortion of social relations, and the diversion from systemic analysis.

THE IMPLIED AUDIENCE

We are now in a good position to comment on the implied audience (cf. Black, 1970; Wander, 1984) of the personal branding movement. We have already observed some of the gender-oriented, race-based, and class-specific aspects of personal branding—at least as the movement has been articulated by its key proponents. We can now say that the primary audience—though not the exclusive one—is a largely White, male, professional class of middle managers and other dislocated professionals who are seeking a new formula for success in a world seemingly turned upside down. To the extent that other groups are addressed by personal branders, they are either assumed to fit this dominant mold (i.e., by being conspicuously absent from the discourse and imagery of the books, web sites, and seminars) or they are implicitly instructed to resolve individually any tensions that might be present between their cultural norms for work and career and those of the packaged professional. From the sources we have surveyed, we would say that the personal branding movement makes a nod toward diversity in the category of gender but that it in fact perpetuates stereotypes of women and does not adequately deal with either the second shift or the glass ceiling. Age is rarely mentioned; when it is, it is treated as a problem that one must overcome by developing the perfect brand.

THE IMPLIED INDIVIDUAL

The personal branding movement, as revealed in the web sites, books, and seminars treated here, draws heavily on an ethos of self-reliance and atomized responsibility and on the mythos of the market as a democratic domain of possibility. The position of the individual within the discursive universe of personal branding is both elevated and highly constrained. Although the individual is being told that he or she is the center and urged to formulate and reformulate a distinctive identity, there is little talk of internal spiritual or emotional growth and even less questioning of the system that supposedly requires the branding of self and career. The personal branding movement presents itself as the only reasonable alternative for individual success but does not engage the fact that the range of options under discussion is remarkably narrow, especially when seen in a wider historical and cultural context.

THE DISTORTION OF
SOCIAL RELATIONS

In his controversial book, *The Corrosion of Character*, Sennett (1998) described well how the contingent work culture has not only undermined bonds of loyalty between employer and employee but also has fostered a kind of shallowness in human relations at work. At the same time, organizations of all sorts are renewing their persuasive campaigns that portray their work environments as warm, friendly, supportive, and attuned to the needs of individuals and families. Put in neo-Kantian terms, the ethos of personal branding offers little concern for others and no regard, in logical terms, for the results of generalizing the very kinds of behavior and thinking that personal branding promotes. That is, a professional work world where personal branding predominates would also be one with few enduring bonds and little trust but a great deal of political maneuvering, competition, and cynicism. Social values have little depth beyond their packaging and promotion, and inhabitants of this marketed world would not be expected to hold or demonstrate

lasting social commitments. Players would be looking at themselves in the mirror as well as over the shoulders of others while they strive to fashion and refashion themselves without concern for values, deep satisfactions, or contributions to society.

THE DIVERSION FROM SYSTEMIC ISSUES

Ultimately, personal branding suggests a highly individualized professional world of activity and relationships within the parameters of conformity and cynical game playing. In our survey of major sources and resources for personal branding, we have found little to suggest the importance of collaboration and even less to suggest that people work together to change the rules of the game. In this case, the lack of systemic reflection equates perfectly with a lack of ethical self-examination. If a form of virtue ethics were employed alongside the promotional discourse of personal branding, there would be some hope for the noble professional. Instead, an exceedingly narrow form of instrumentality underlies the main discourse of personal branding, and it offers no encouragement to the individual professional to reevaluate or apply values.

In sum, by capitalizing (pun intended) on a crisis image of economic turbulence and individual disorientation, the personal branding movement threatens to perpetuate individuals' sense of alienation. At the very least, we find nothing in the books, web sites, or seminars to encourage individuals toward self or social transformation. However, because our analysis here is focused on the possibilities of subject positions invited by personal branding discourse, it cannot speak to the ways in which that discourse is actually taken up and used (or misused) by its ultimate consumers. An interesting extension of this analysis of personal branding would be to follow the path of other researchers (e.g., see Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000) to explore the reactions of actual consumers of personal branding and to see how they manage the tensions of identity presented in the discourse.

For the study of organizational communication and for organizational studies in general, the case of personal branding offers an important way of illuminating the contemporary relationships be-

tween work and culture. In personal branding, we find yet another application and extension of marketing's concepts, in line with U.S. individualism and as a response to the changing nature of the labor market and professional life. Personal branding represents yet another reason that we should question the container model of organizations as a set of boundaries for our analyses (Carlone & Taylor, 1998; Cheney & Christensen, 2001; R. Smith, 1997). Although a certain kind of communication is offered by the personal branders as the solution to economic disadvantage and dislocation, that communication itself may contribute to social alienation as well as to a delay in the necessary structural changes of the society.

CLOSING CAVEAT

We are at risk in this essay for offering a one-sided critique of personal branding. We have adopted a critical standpoint that presumes, to some extent, real, foundational depth to personal identity. This position is tempered, however, by postmodern understandings of the multiplicity of identity and rationality, the ongoing play of symbols, and the folly of neatly elevating what we would deem to be substance over what is apparent on the surface. Our commentary is certainly not unidimensional in its attention to issues of gender, race, and class, but we sometimes talk about personal branding as if it had both a monolithic message and a univocal possibility for expression. This is, of course, not necessarily the case. Diverse studies of consumerism and marketization (broadly speaking) reveal that even within genres of experience and communication as seemingly constrained as personals ads (!), multiple avenues of use and expression are possible and actual (Coupland, 1996). Just as Gabriel and Lang (1995) have pointed out the doors to multiple consumer identities, we wish to be open to meanings and practices of personal branding still unforeseen. For example, how might savvy, self-reflexive, or even cynical appropriations of personal brands actually lead to a form of social transformation—on the level of the individual, organizational, professional community, or even beyond? So, what is your brand—er, stand?

APPENDIX
Employment in a Brand You World

Brand You World	Employee World
Working on a memorable (WOW) project. (If it's not WOW . . . I'll make it WOW . . . or bust trying!)	Doing what's assigned
Committed to my craft. Intend to be incredibly good at s-o-m-e-t-h-i-n-g	Working assiduously on in-box contents
Chose this project because it will add to my learning/because it will s-t-r-e-t-c-h me/ because it allows me to hang with cool people	It's what the boss told me to do. (Give me a break.)
Don't waste a single lunch . . . networking is my mantra	Lunch is my business!
Understand that Projects-Are-ME. Period. (This ain't funny: I am my project "portfolio.")	I show up. I don't make waves.
Piss some people off. (Because of my strong beliefs.)	Don't rock the boat!
Would love to have been with Washington at Valley Forge!	I'm almost vested. Don't tread on me!
It's better to ask forgiveness after the fact than permission before. (Always!)	Don't expose your butt.

SOURCE: Peters (1999, pp. 6-7).

NOTES

1. We should offer several observations about terminology. First, we recognize a cluster or constellation of interrelated terms, all dealing in this case with the intersection of market forces and social affairs. Besides *commodification*, the key terms in this group are *marketization*, *commercialization*, and *McDonaldization* (Ritzer, 1993). We might well add *objectification,* although it is broader in scope, simply because of the long tradition in social criticism for observing the treatment of persons as objects in advertising and other institutions (Cheney & Carroll, 1997). Although we could easily devote an entire essay to defining these terms or, more usefully, capturing the orbits of meaning surrounding them, here we would simply observe, following Desmond (1995), that *commodification* refers broadly to the substitution of an objective product or humanly defined part of the natural world for an aspect of the social world. Following Marx (1867/1967), this means that something's fundamental "use values" become colonized by exchange and

sign values, thus reducing the range of meaning (or even life force, if you will) of the part of society in question. Although such issues are beyond the scope of this essay, for now we wish to comment on the obvious commodifying and reductionistic aspects of branding a person while at the same time being open to the ironic possibilities for creative uses of those meanings by the persons using them or by others (as we address briefly at the end of the essay).

2. Perhaps somewhere in between Montoya's (n.d.) product-centered and Hamby's (n.d.) identity-centered visions of personal branding is Peters's (1999) invitation for readers to write short "Yellow Pages" ads for themselves. As an example of such short, pithy self-descriptions, Peters cited Erik Hansen, whose personal Yellow Pages ad reads:

> Funny, irreverent, cynical, optimistic, thrill-seeking Gemini thrives on working hard with smart people. Former North Sea fisherman, steel sculptor, glass blower, explosives man, world traveler has settled down . . . to become an anal-compulsive-detail oriented project manager/editor. Won't work with whiners. Wonders why no one seems to know how to load a dishwasher properly. Guiding Motto: from Henry James: Be one on whom nothing is lost. Motto #2: Work hard. Play hard. Eat well. Buy Art. Motto #3: If you're not having fun, you're not doing the write thing. (1999, p. 36)

3. None of this is to say that the empirical, rather than ideal, persons occupying the careers of late 19th- or early 20th-century Weberian-style bureaucracies were *not* motivated by self-interest but, rather, to heighten the dangers lurking when even the checks described by Weber (1978) are removed from worker's career motivations.

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