The business of interpreting: FAQ 5 – Why do I need to be a brand?

Personal branding is a way of improving the package your skills are delivered in so that others perceive you as distinctive, irreplaceable.

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Do you know what people think when they hear your name? Do you consciously try to influence what they think? Or do their impressions form haphazardly while you hope that they will understand your underlying value without any input from you? One way of intentionally influencing them is to build your personal brand.

What is a brand?

Simply put, a brand is anything that is recognizable, that is known, liked, and trusted because it is consistently the same. Let me give you some examples: McDonald’s, the Subaru Impreza WRX STi, Bob Dylan. In each case, when you hear one of these names you get an impression, a feeling, an awareness of exactly what you will get when you open the box (sometimes literally).

In McDonald’s case, you know that wherever you are in the world, you will be able to find sustenance at a reasonable price, and in an atmosphere that reflects America - why else do you think it was a popular dating spot in Moscow back when the first restaurant opened? Russians didn’t pick up the hamburgers the way Americans did, and they didn't see it as a cheap and easy way to feed the kids. But it was seen as a way of visiting a small piece of America - so couples went dressed up, and pulled apart the burgers to eat the meat, bread and salad separately, with forks and knives. OK, the audience may have changed today, but the restaurant is still popular with people who want to eat something they already know, like, and trust, and they know they can find this little bit of Americana in Moscow, New York, and Paris.

The Subaru Impreza WRX STi (yes, all the letters mean something) is a driver’s car. In fact, it has long been seen as the supreme driver’s car at a decent price point, and it won many rally championships. Owners flash their headlights at each other when they meet on the road, like members of a private club, and they are immensely picky whom they will flash - if the model doesn’t have a turbo and the gold wheels, you don’t get the flash.

Bob Dylan - well, 'nuff said.

What is a personal brand?

Personal branding started back in 1997, with Tom Peters’ article “The Brand Called You”.
Magazines started helping people become brands in a world where the cradle-to-grave job no longer existed or was no longer considered satisfying. Unlike improving one’s skills, personal branding is a way of improving the package those skills are delivered in, so that people see you as distinctive and not as an interchangeable, fungible commodity.

**Why are we so different?**

Nowadays, all entrepreneurs are brands; we trust the new company because that particular entrepreneur already had a company we all liked. Even employees inside companies are brands, or else they wouldn’t be able to advance. There is even a growing market for personal brand consultants to help you with just these issues.

So why should we interpreters be any different? After all, it is what clients expect. As you already understand, your packaging helps them know and like you and, secondarily, trust what you do even though they don’t understand it at all.

**Why do you choose a brand?**

Let’s think about this from a different perspective: why do YOU choose a brand? Why have you chosen to drive that car, eat at that restaurant, read that book? Do you make a practice of choosing goods or services with no research, even if it’s only asking your sister what she’s reading today?

Usually you choose to buy goods or services because either you - or someone whom you know, like, and trust - already knows, likes, and trusts - that brand. You choose that author because you have liked what s/he wrote in the past. You choose that restaurant because your Italian friend recommended it as the best Italian restaurant in the city. You bought that book because the bookstore staff highly recommended it. You drive that car because you like and/or admire the tribe of people who also own it, and you want to belong.

If YOU do that, why should your prospective clients do otherwise?

**Surprises are not always good**

And remember that you are not particularly happy with surprises when you buy and get something other than what you expected. Surprise does not always equal delight.

Subaru found that out when they changed the Impreza. They had originally focused on drivers, so put all the money into the mechanical side and very little into creature comforts: the dashboard looked like cheap plastic instead of feeling more like leather, the seats weren’t very comfortable - just very useful when cornering and driving sideways. When Subaru decided to make the inside more comfortable, sacrificing some of the driver’s features, their sales dropped. The new model alienated their ferociously loyal customer base, and didn’t attract a new demographic because everyone expected the same “driver’s car.” They went back to their roots for the next model.

And for an example from the culture world, just think of the furor that arose when Bob Dylan switched from being a folk music star to playing rock with “Like a Rolling Stone.”

**You already know someone**

In fact, you most likely already know colleagues with whom you are consistently delighted to work; they would be members of your dream team if you were staffing a meeting. You may even emulate them in your interpreting approach, your booth manners, your customer relations. I am sure they
have bad days - they lost a lucrative contract, their kids were sick all night... But would you know it from their demeanor? Their performance in the booth? Their relations with other colleagues or customers? These colleagues are consistent, so have a personal brand.

Why not emulate them? It's much easier to model your behavior on someone else than to make every little decision all the time. It’s very easy: you just ask yourself “What would [colleague] do?” If you can’t imagine the colleague you are emulating doing something, don’t do it. You become more consistent, people know what to expect, and you begin to understand the concept of a personal brand, if only in the interpreting world.

**Become recognizable to your clients**

Now take this to the next level. To become a recognizable brand for prospective clients, you need to find reference points that they would understand, from outside the profession. So now is the time to put on your thinking cap: what brands do you identify with that are not interpreting related? Not brands that you merely like or follow; brands that, when you think about them, really resonate. You want to *be* that brand. Feel free to pick more than one brand, though if they resonate for different reasons, you should limit your choice to two or three.

Next, think about why the brand/s resonate/s with you. What are the main characteristics that call to you? Think about them, and see if you can bring them into your interpreting career. Create a type of “style guide” that will help you remain consistent with your chosen packaging.

**Putting it all together**

Now take all of that information and put it together with your interpreting market. This first isn’t my favorite example, but it is an easy one to show: are you a complete fan of McDonald’s? Do you like their consistency, their delivery of a known product that won’t let you down, anywhere in the world, at a low price point? You could take the consistency as your hallmark, the fact that all your clients will get a known (if not high level) service for not a lot of money. What would McDonald’s do?

Maybe you prefer having more of a niche market like Subaru does with its Impreza model: that keen focus on what the core customer wants, the attention to detail specifically in that area, not being all things to all people. Are these characteristics that could serve you and your interpreting market? What would the Subaru Impreza do?

Even Bob Dylan can serve as a model. He pissed off his loyal fans when he turned to rock, but then proved that he could influence more than just folk and rock, and moved into blues, gospel, rockabilly, garnering new fans and a Nobel Prize along the way, and all with that voice. The characteristic of being ever-changing can work if you are consistent in your “ever-changing-ness”. Or the characteristic of being supremely good at expressing a message in a distinctive voice, or in different styles may be the one to focus on. What would Dylan do?

Now think about what you are selling, and who your client is. Consistently use your new style guide to refine your packaging when selling to prospective clients, and hey presto! You are a brand!

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