



ianka fleerackers

**OWN
YOUR
STORY**



or someone else will

Lannoo
Campus

This book was originally published in Dutch as *Own your story. Or someone else will.*
Personal branding en thought leadership voor professionals met een reputatie,
LannooCampus, 2023.

D/2024/45/361 – ISBN 9789401445221– NUR 808

Interior design: Wendy De Haes
Cover design: Karl Demoen

© ianka fleerackers & Lannoo Publishers nv, Tielt, 2024.

LannooCampus Publishers is a subsidiary of Lannoo Publishers, the book and
multimedia division of Lannoo Publishers nv.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced and/or made public, by means of
printing, photocopying, microfilm or any other means, without the prior written
permission of the publisher.

LannooCampus Publishers
Vaartkom 41 box 01.02
3000 Leuven
Belgium
www.lannoocampus.com

P.O. Box 23202
1100 DS Amsterdam
The Netherlands

Contents

PROLOGUE:	
IT'S UP TO YOU	8
Read, Listen, and Act	11
PART 1:	
DARE TO GET ATTENTION	12
Chapter 1: Everything is perception	14
Chapter 2: Dare to be visible	26
PART 2:	
WHY	40
Chapter 3: Personal branding as a growth marketing strategy	43
Chapter 4: Own your journey	62
PART 3:	
PERSONAL(ITY)	74
Chapter 5: From personal to personality	75
Chapter 6: How's your personality doing?	84
PART 4:	
STORYTELLING	114
Chapter 7: Develop your narrative	115
Chapter 8: Who are you telling your stories to?	130

PART 5:	
THE PROCESS	140
Chapter 9: Overnight success	145
Chapter 10: Process versus status	152
Chapter 11: The three dimensions of personality branding	170
Chapter 12: Tactics for online personality branding	174
Chapter 13: Do more with less	183
Chapter 14: Storytelling once more	192
Chapter 15: The tactics in real life personality branding	202
Chapter 16: What about the ROI?	225
PART 6:	
OWN YOUR ARTIFICIAL IDENTITY	230
Chapter 17: Welcome to the Metaverse: a new digital frontier	232
Chapter 18: The messy middle	238
Chapter 19: AI replicas for personal brands	246
EPILOGUE:	
WHAT'S YOUR BRANDED COCKTAIL?	252
About the author	258
Start Your Journey Now!	260
Bibliography	261



**PROLOGUE:
IT'S UP TO YOU**

Everywhere in the world, people follow people because of who they are, the stories they tell, the changes they initiate in their environment or in the world at large. We encounter them through the internet, traditional media, products, and services. We see them in videos, read their content, listen to their speeches, and become captivated by their influence. They are referred to as influencers, personal brands, celebrities, leaders, and thought leaders. Thanks to technology and social media, anyone now can become influential. There seem to be so many already that the internet appears to be oversaturated with individuals keen to showcase themselves, show their best side, and make you believe that you need them. If this makes you feel disheartened, or disinclined to try yourself, then I understand. I too struggle with not wanting to further fill an already brimming bucket with my own contributions. But if you truly believe in your heart that you have something of value to offer and you choose not to because of this, you're only setting yourself up for frustration, to ultimately become a grumpy old person, bitterly counting down your days in a retirement home.

I've written this book for two reasons: the first is to inspire you, and the second, to give you insight. I aim to inspire you to lead, to step into the limelight and share your story with your tribe. To lead a life where you don't need to conform to a label that's been slapped onto you, where you aren't too much of this or that. There are people in the world who are meant to follow, and there are those meant to lead. And although it might seem nowadays that it's better to be a leader and that everyone is a leader, that's not true. And that's all right. We need both. This book can help you uncover in what ways and to what extent you can be a leader. I also want to offer insight, yet this book is not a how-to guide. I won't teach you how to defeat the algorithm of LinkedIn, nor provide the best tips for creating a video. A book is no longer the appropriate format for that; besides, it would be outdated within six months.

I have a different plan for you. With this book, I want to provoke you to think about how you wish to utilise personal branding in your life: not solely as a marketing strategy but as a means to build a legacy.

I write this book with a background in arts and media and a passion for art and literature. My career as an actress meant that in traditional media, I was a recognised celebrity. Today, I am predominantly visible online, perform on stage as ‘myself’, and continue to build my brand there. This provides an additional layer of experience, which I know many involved in personal branding and public speaking coaching lack. In the best cases, they have worked behind the scenes in a media company, but never in front of the camera, they haven’t been subject to tabloid gossip, or had to deal with criticism in the press. Even more so, many are only familiar with social media as the means to build a personal brand and are just now making their first steps onto the stage or as an author. In this, I wish to make a difference. I’ve done it all. And no, it’s not arrogance or conceit. It is simply a fact. My experience also means that my perspective on professional personal branding is different. To me, personal branding isn’t just an online phenomenon; it’s not an ego story, and not about fame.

This book is for you, the professional with an established reputation, a track record of ten years or more, and an intellectual frustration: you have more to say than what you are currently doing. You could be an employee, part of the C-level suite of a company, wanting to amplify your voice within or outside your job. You could be a CEO aspiring to thought leadership. Or you might be a solo entrepreneur seeking to monetise your expertise, knowledge, and personality. My aim is to guide you through this book in taking intellectual leadership by developing a professional personal brand or even thought leadership.

Read, Listen, and Act

Podcast alert:

Listening to individuals who are actively engaged, with their feet firmly planted on the ground, is always insightful. Rather than just writing about them, I had conversations with them. That's why, in this book, you will encounter references to my podcast whenever there's a compelling discussion that enriches the topic or offers an alternative angle.

Take action:

This book is about awareness, discovery and reflection. If you want action steps, then take a look at my programmes on iankafleerackers.com and subscribe to the newsletter.





**PART 1:
DARE TO GET
ATTENTION**

I was attending a seminar by an American business coach at the Four Seasons Hotel in Fort Lauderdale, Florida when I decided to call a spade a spade and write that personal branding revolves around attention. Getting attention, giving attention, earning attention, provoking attention, avoiding attention, directing attention. And it is precisely this that poses the greatest stumbling block for many people: not knowing how to handle attention.

That's why I want to first delve into the various facets of attention. I invite you to pause and consider your personal stance and beliefs on this matter. It will clarify how you intend to deal with personal branding or what you need to change to build a strong personal brand.

Chapter 1:

Everything is perception

Let me get straight to the point and make it very personal. When you look at yourself, do you recognise yourself best when you look in the mirror or at a photo of yourself? The answer is: your reflection in the mirror.

The mere-exposure effect

Because we see our reflection more often, pay attention to it, and become accustomed to it, we naturally start to appreciate it more; this is a phenomenon known in psychology as the mere-exposure effect. But there's more to it: the mirror shows us a reversed version of ourselves. We see right and left as opposites. The facial half that is on the right in the image is used for self-recognition, as research from University College Dublin shows. This is because the function of self-recognition resides in our left brain hemisphere.

When we look at a photo of ourselves, we unconsciously still focus on the right side but then see the other side of our face. And that is not the image we recognise from the mirror. We often can't quite put our finger on it, but it feels odd, different. We forget that we have various facial expressions. So when we see a photo of ourselves, we think: huh, that looks strange.

We have a perception of ourselves, an illusion that our appearance is constant. But the way we look depends on our mood and context. So, in reality, we don't even know what we truly look like. Colleagues, friends, and family do see all these different faces. They know what

we look like when we're gloomy, jealous, or insecure. But also how we glow when we're overjoyed or in love. So they actually have a better idea of what we look like than we do ourselves. Yet, people don't look at us objectively either. Everyone views us through a lens, influenced by their experiences, cultural background, life history, personality traits, emotions, and their own illusion of themselves. They too form a perception of who we are.

The Looking Glass Self effect

But what if what we perceive matches reality? What if your behaviour and self-esteem are dictated by your predictions about how others see you? When it comes to understanding ourselves, social interaction plays a more crucial role than many of us realise. Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley suggests that individuals develop their self-image and sense of self-worth by observing how they are perceived by others, a concept he named the 'Looking Glass Self' (1902). People use the judgements of others in social interaction as a sort of mirror to measure their own value, values, and behaviour. This naturally implies that the 'self-concept' is not developed in isolation but within a social environment, indicating that society and the individual are inseparable.

The process of the 'Looking Glass Self' unfolds in three steps:

1. An individual in a social situation imagines how they appear to others.
2. That individual imagines other people's judgement of that appearance.
3. The individual develops feelings about that and reacts to these perceived judgements.

However, the process becomes more complex due to the multitude of contacts, the context of each interaction, and the nature of the individuals involved. Not all feedback, for example, carries the same weight. People may take the reactions of those they trust more seriously than those of strangers. Signals can be misinterpreted. People also usually

consider their own value systems when thinking about changes in their behaviour or self-image.

Ultimately, the process of the Looking Glass Self is one of alignment, where you continuously strive to create congruence between your internal and external world. Thus, you spend your entire life observing, adjusting, and seeking balance.

The Cyber Self

Social media adds an infinitely more complex layer because it allows you to connect with others in ways you could never have imagined before. You now have not just one mirror but an ever-increasing number of mirrors.

In 2017, Mary Aiken was one of the very first forensic cyberpsychologists to delve into people's online personalities. She introduced the concept of a 'cyberself', the version of oneself that someone chooses to present on a digital platform. Just like in real life, the cyberself can communicate with other individuals, receive social feedback, and conform to social norms. However, Aiken notes significant differences between the cyberself and the real self.

For instance, a person can have multiple versions of their cyberself. He or she might present a professional persona on LinkedIn, a casual one on Instagram, or an artistic one on Pinterest. And who knows how we will shape ourselves in the Metaverse. The cyberself also persists in social spaces, even when people are not interacting with those environments in real time. In this way, social media users are never fully shielded from exposure to judgement and critique. And unlike the real self, the cyberself is much more malleable when it comes to being shaped, updated, and perfected, for better or worse.

Of course 'you get only one chance to make a first impression'.

Social perception or interpersonal perception, there's no escaping it. We all live in a kind of matrix that we occasionally puncture. And then they hit you with this: "You only get one chance to make a first impression." What terrifying and ridiculous wordplay. Of course, you can only make a first impression once. You can also only make a second impression once. What did you expect? Do they mean you can only impress once?

A Princeton study from 2006 showed that the accuracy of a first impression someone makes on you is significant and unchangeable. In 2021, researchers came up with a more nuanced result. They studied the impact of first impressions on business relationships/partnerships and reached various conclusions. It will surprise no one that their research confirms first impressions are very important when it comes to building a trust relationship. However, the study also notes that a bad first impression does not always spell disaster. That first impression is mainly about detecting trust. Can this person be trusted or not? And with a feeling like trust, you're dealing with the reptilian brain that immediately wants to know if you're in danger and should attack, run away, or freeze. Are you safe with this person or not?

Now, I believe that this, too, should be taken with a pinch of salt. Because there's also the context in which a first impression occurs, as well as the personality and mood of the person making a judgement. Trust means different things to different people. Suppose you didn't do so well that first time. After all, you're only human. What's the secret to rectifying a bad first impression? A lot will depend on the actions that follow that first meeting to increase your 'trust' factor. And that takes time.

Can we change perception?

Based solely on a first impression, someone can form a judgement about you. A judgement that may extend far beyond those initial seconds, that one evening of conversation. For someone who doesn't

possess a social superpower, this is a nightmare. Fortunately, with a few adjustments, you can mitigate the damage. Here are some of my tips:

1/ Ask friends and colleagues, people you trust and who will give you an honest answer, how they perceive you when you enter a room and meet new people. According to them, how do you behave? Compare this with what you experience yourself and think about what you want to change.

During my training sessions, I sometimes have my clients call their friends to ask them these questions. They always find it an embarrassing task because it's out of their comfort zone, but once they've done it, they receive valuable feedback. Moreover, they can hide behind the fact that their coach assigned the task. Self-awareness is always the first step in personality branding.

2/ Prepare yourself when you go to an event or meeting. Find out more about the guests attending. Think about relevant topics you could talk about.

As a moderator of events, researching people is always part of my job. I've also started doing it when I'm attending as a guest. It's a smart and handy trait if you quickly learn to connect with someone else's life. And remember: the connection can also be found in opposing interests. Then, it's important not to turn it into a game of right or wrong, but to enjoy the differences and the discussion.

3/ Enter the room calmly, look around before you proceed further into the room. It allows you to acclimatise. But at the same time, it gives others the chance to see you. I always think of animals that first smell each other from a distance and then come closer in a circular motion. But also of how the names of royals are announced when they stand in the doorway before entering. Two very different worlds, but both are intended to make encounters go smoothly.

4/ And then the most important part: smile. Practise an open, smiling expression at home. Think about what your face feels like when you're surprised, curious, or amazed. Look in the mirror and see what happens to your eyes and mouth. Your posture. A facial expression is a combination of muscle tension and emotion. Learn to feel this and reproduce the feeling. Work with muscle memory. Tone it down a bit, and you get an open look. The most beautiful and sincere smile is a Duchenne smile – a smile that reaches your eyes. The funny thing is that when you start practising such a smile, you also become happier. It's a contagious smile, one that inspires trust, and you know exactly what I mean if I refer to Julia Roberts. Her smile is worth gold. But so is yours.

This is a more conscious approach to giving a 'first impression' and correcting a less favourable impression through subsequent actions. These are four points you can address to influence the perception others form of you, but there's more. It's about getting a foot in the door, which is crucial. Creating your own opportunities so that people can get to know you better, rather than depending on the opportunities others offer to make yourself known. Taking the initiative yourself and ensuring that people have the chance to get to know you better, even if you're not physically present. That's where the strength of personal branding lies.

Reputation

A first impression is made in contact with others. But what if you're not there? In a book about personal branding, you're bound to come across the following quote by Jeff Bezos: "Your brand is what people say about you when you're not in the room." And it seems that if Bezos says it, then it must be true. It definitely fits into the narrative of anyone involved with personal branding, just as the first impression quote fits that of body language experts, and the fear of public speaking quote suits public speaking coaches. These are quotes that I like to examine closely.

When you ask yourself what people might talk about when they discuss (or gossip about) you, it leads to the experiences they've had with you and the perception they've acquired from those experiences. People will make their own thing out of it, and since you're not in the room, they'll do with it what they want. And that turns out to be the definition of reputation.

“Reputation is the overall quality or character as seen or judged by people in general.”

(Merriam-Webster)

“The opinion that people have of someone or something, based on past behaviour or character.”

(Cambridge dictionary)

Although reputation and personal brand overlap, they are two different things. Most people first have a reputation and may opt for a personal brand. Most personal brands do have a reputation. Generations born with a smartphone in their cradle do it differently. Because they start working on their cyberself at a young age, they tend to think they have a personal brand sooner. This does not always have advantages, but they will find that out later on in life.

If your reputation as a business leader comes under fire, then a communication expert will work on reputation management, which means adjusting what was said. Putting out fires, calming tempers, issuing corrections, arranging interviews... And if your reputation as an employee or job seeker comes under fire, you face gossip, evaluations, dismissal, fewer job offers... Scary, isn't it?