
Developing Your Professional Online Identity

Defining Who You Are And How You Show Up In The World!

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What is a Professional Online Identity?

The hyper connected global society we now live in continues to push the boundaries on how we communicate, form our opinions, make decisions and engage in activities. This unprecedented amount of information that we can all access at the click of a button can take an individual, initiative, product or organization from virtually non-existent to an integral part of our daily lives overnight.

The digital media landscape is the big equalizer for us all and allows everyone the opportunity to build an online presence. Whether it be through using an online profile, building a website or running an online advertising campaign, you can build a visible brand identity and decide how you show up in the world.

For progressive professionals this is a game changer. You have the power to create your own professional brand and leverage multiple channels to position yourself online. This is the key to developing a *professional online identity* which is *your brand with respect to professional pursuits that is visible through digital media*.

Building a Professional Online Identity

When it comes to building your professional online identity, it is vital that you solidify your professional brand prior to launching online. Take an inventory of all your professional endeavours and accomplishments to date then write a professional branding statement or positioning statement for how you would like to be positioned online. This will give you a solid understanding of the best messaging, word choice and image to use that accurately reflects your professional brand and differentiates you so you can rise above the competition.

The key is to clearly define your professional attributes and expertise in such a way that conveys value to an employer, organization or within the marketplace. Focus on highlighting your core competencies which positions you as a top tier professional, expert or recognized authority in a particular niche or field.

This approach is supported by Vancouver based *Business Consultant*, Ernest Daddey of *EOK Consulting* who stated, "Today for individuals and companies, it is fundamental that you spend some quality time in building your professional online identity and really hone in on exactly what you do and what this impact will be for your customer or those who engage you...ensure your language is concise, know your value proposition and the most appropriate delivery method when engaging online."

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Social Networking vs. Professional Networking

Once a clear professional brand has been established, you will want to gain further insights into the best approach for the execution of your professional online identity. This involves learning the primary roles and various engagement strategies for social networking and professional networking in the digital media landscape. It is important to know how social networking and professional networking may serve two completely different functions.

In many cases, the popularity and early adopters of social media and social networking have influenced the etiquette and behaviours of professional networking. Avoid the temptation to follow the crowd or model your behaviour after others simply because they are the most active online. Conduct your own due diligence around the best practices, functionality and primary objectives for each platform or website.

Here is a simplified general overview of social networking and professional networking:

Social Networking typically involves connecting for the purpose of staying connected and has no limit on the context of the communications. Topics can range from discussions about your private life, personal preferences or any interests that are appealing to you.

Professional Networking is focused on communications, access to information or resources to build and maintain your professional network, accelerate career pursuits and stay informed on relevant industry topics.

Your professional online identity should be consistent and not be confused by a conflicting image or persona visible on social profiles or social networking engagement. Be cognizant from the point of view of a potential customer, client, employer, decision maker or industry stakeholder who is searching for you online because they intend to engage you in some way. As Clayton Mitchell, *Digital Marketing Analyst* and *Social Media Metrics Instructor* (UBC CS) explains, "Social profiles only show one dimension of who you are and that might not be in the context that they are looking for...you are at risk of people's search behaviour and can't guarantee that they are going to explore your online identity in a way you want them to."

Consider the approach of leading with professional networking and using social networking as supporting activities to reinforce your professional brand and your overall online presence.

Build Your Profile With LinkedIn

When you are ready to begin establishing your online presence the first place to start is with the top professional networking platform LinkedIn. If you only take one step or one action in building your professional online identity let it be building your profile on LinkedIn.

LinkedIn allows you to share your professional story in your own words and build your profile in such a way that highlights your professional strengths and significant accomplishments while presenting your professional brand online.

The benefit of telling your professional story is that you get 100% control of shaping your professional image and can accurately give an account of all the significant milestones and achievements in relation to your professional brand. LinkedIn leverages an individual's or organization's social capital by enabling transparency of professional networks, associations and special interest groups to strengthen relationships, enable collaborative action and break down barriers in communications and access to opportunities. The LinkedIn profile acts as a snapshot of your professional experience and career history by focusing on selected accomplishments, core competencies and professional designations.

Whether your current pursuits involve *building a brand, engaging your network, leveraging your expertise or influencing the market*, LinkedIn can support in accomplishing your goals by properly positioning your brand online. When it comes to what to include on your LinkedIn profile, this will be entirely dependent on your primary objective of your professional online identity. For example, a seasoned professional who is employed full time may opt to only include the current and previous job titles and company names of where they have worked. Where as a business professional who is active in the community may wish to include their volunteer roles on boards and involvement with professional organizations because they intend to use LinkedIn to raise their profile and be recognized as a leader in the community.

One of the common questions that comes from students who attend the *Build Your Profile with LinkedIn - Introduction & Intermediate* course is: How much should be written on their LinkedIn profile? I support the philosophy of *quality over quantity* when it comes to the content you include on your LinkedIn profile.

Jason Bax, *Online Entrepreneur and Show Host*, spoke candidly about his observations on individual profiles on LinkedIn, "The biggest thing I notice is the more qualified the individual, the more brief the profile...I think it is because successful people walk the walk more than they talk the talk so they really don't have to say much because their achievements speak for themselves...Brevity is the key."

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Bax went on to share how he has been approached on a number of occasions through LinkedIn by decision makers and professionals who eventually have hired him for speaking engagements and consulting work. He recounted how one of his connections from LinkedIn recommended his program, "How to give an unforgettable pitch" to a colleague and this led to him presenting his program to MBA students at the Sauder School of Business.

While the primary purpose and culture on LinkedIn is of a professional nature, LinkedIn does allow for the inclusion of personal interests, volunteer work and activities with special interest groups. This portion of your profile should not be overlooked because elements of your personal life can have a positive impact on your professional life and give others insight into who you are as a professional while building rapport. Your personal life and social activities may help guide your moral compass, professional ethics and values on how you approach work and make decisions which ultimately contributes to your professional brand.

Authenticity with Responsibility

There are no official guidelines when it comes to merging your personal life and professional life online. Think in terms of *authenticity with responsibility* in representing your authentic self while being responsible in all your conduct and language online. As a rule of thumb, avoid public online criticism, critiques of professionals and topics that do not reflect your realm of responsibility or expertise.

Unfortunately, the context of the written language can be easily misconstrued and our culture has evolved into a digitally savvy population that can include much scrutiny. We are all forming opinions based on the headlines of articles shared, comments, "likes", blogs and images we see online. When it comes to professional online identity, ensure all your communications reflect your professional credibility as it is less about personal opinions and preferences.

When you begin to engage online, all of your behaviours, images and headlines associated with your profiles begin to shape your professional online identity. Your words alone are not enough. Your professional image is critical and the perception of your image is an integral part of your professional online identity. Ensure that your photograph accurately reflects your professional image with respect to your professional pursuits. If you are unsure of what this would look like, consult with a branding specialist to help you present a professional polished look. An alternate approach is to adopt what I refer to as *The Interview Rule*: present yourself as you would if you were going to a job interview for your ideal job.

Managing Your Professional Online Identity

Managing your image online involves understanding the parameters around how much exposure you will eventually receive with your online profiles. For many, the idea of sharing your photo online for the entire world to see can be unsettling. This is often the case for many of the students who take my program *Build Your Profile with LinkedIn - Introduction & Intermediate* (UBC CS). For LinkedIn and any other professional networking or social media platforms, you want to spend some time to familiarize yourself with the privacy settings and choose a setting that you are most comfortable with. This will allow you to control how much is shared and limit who can view the content and information you provided so you don't have to be exposed to the world.

There are two major questions to ask yourself that can have a significant effect on the trajectory of your professional brand, the information and materials that are shared and the quality of your professional relationships. They are as follows:

1. *Should I separate my social network from my professional network?*
This works best for most individuals and tends to quell any uncertainty about sharing the appropriate content and messages to the right individuals.
2. *What criteria should I use to determine who I deem suitable for my online professional network?*
Consider current and previous colleagues, classmates, alumni, fellow members of professional groups and organizations and anyone you respect and trust who you have had a professional relationship with.

Managing your professional online identity across multiple platforms can be a very involved process. The rules and regulations, layouts and functions of the various platforms can change frequently and require constant monitoring to ensure your image and brand online remains intact. A proactive approach is required to maintain your professional reputation and sentiment around your overall professional online identity.

"It can be pretty hard to change perceptions and not be impacted by the recency effect...the recency effect is when people tend to remember the last impression you gave them" advises Clayton Mitchell.

S.M.A.R.T. Digital Media Communications

Implementing a sound digital media communications strategy is now the responsibility of any individual or organization who has an online presence and is engaging online. The methodology needs to be part public relations, marketing strategy and best practices for communications.

Many of the successful case studies and material we read about online involves examples of social media and online marketing campaigns executed by large organizations, with established brands, big budgets and existing customer base. The strategies and tactics used may not translate well for the average professional who is managing a professional network of 250-750 connections and 2-3 online profiles. A more realistic digital media communications strategy for an independent professional would be to focus on staying top of mind amongst those in your network, purposeful engagement and sharing relevant information and resources that speaks to your area of expertise.

I have summarized my recommended best practices for professionals into what I have coined ***S.M.A.R.T Digital Media Communications for Professionals***. The acronym S.M.A.R.T refers to *Strategy, Management, Audience, Reputation* and *Trust*. As a professional engaging in professional communications online, you will benefit greatly by focusing on the following:

1. *Strategy*: Develop a sound strategy for engaging online that includes being purposeful in all your engagements and builds on your professional online identity.
2. *Management*: Use tactics and tools that you can implement and easily maintain on an ongoing basis.
3. *Audience*: Understand the values and priorities of your professional network. Your network serves as your audience and you need to cater to their needs throughout all your communications.
4. *Reputation*: Ensure that all activities accurately reflect your level of professionalism and responsibility.
5. *Trust*: Follow all the same rules and etiquette online that you would in person when building a trusted relationship.

Communication style in today's digital media landscape will vary from individual to individual and may not reflect the culture or regulations of an organization or group as a whole. Regardless of how you may be engaged by other professionals online, continue to maintain your standards of communicating as you would in any traditional business communications. As individuals, we really appreciate being able to "put a face to a name" and the same can be said for understanding a professional brand. This is why it is so important to accurately share your professional story regarding your career progression and professional pursuits to ensure your professional online identity is one you are proud of and showcases you in the best possible light.