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Academic Branding: A Case of Six Faculty

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Introduction. Branding is not just a marketing tool used in the business world. A brand is defined as a name, term, design, sign, symbol, or a combination of these to represent a seller and differentiate the seller from others (Schneider, 2003; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Aside from businesses, branding has been proven successful for universities, but what about the employees of these universities? Is their brand synonymous with the university's brand? In academia, professional branding can be applied to: (a) further one's career, (b) move through the tenure process, and (c) gain national and international recognition. In this digital age, personal blogs and websites have been on the rise and are helpful in job searching. Branding through websites is a way for academic professionals to have a digital portfolio speak for them to potential academic institutions. Research on academic branding is limited, but this case study aims to explore the topic. The researchers documented and examined the process of developing professional websites for six tenure-track professors in the human sciences, in which are in the apparel and merchandising discipline. The ultimate goal was to develop "best practices" for academic branding for tenure eligible faculty.

Background. Website development has become much easier since the arrival of free website building sites such as Wix, Squarespace, and Wordpress. Sites such as these provide a useful and convenient service for people who are creating their own brands. Although this research specifically focuses on academic branding in higher education, literature does support the need and the significance for creating your own brand in any profession. Personal branding can communicate what image or message that a person wants to send out to others (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). Websites can be used as a "brand voice" which is a statement that highlights your experiences and abilities (Meyer, 2016). Not only is personal branding useful while searching for jobs, it is also influential in the processes of "going up" promotion and/or tenure. Public professional websites are a way for a person to develop a virtual identity that is searchable. This "search ability" is not only beneficial in the process of promotion and/or tenure, but for overall networking with other professionals in higher education.

Methods. The process of development each faculty member's website was multi-stage. First, questionnaires were distributed individually to the six tenure-track faculty members to understand the aesthetics and functionality of their websites. Questions asked were: (a) What is your preferred color scheme for the website?, (b) Any specific background or patterns you would like in the layout of the site? (c) What music, if any, would you like playing on your website?, (d) Is there a particular font style that you would prefer on the website?, (e) How many photos would you like posted on the site?, (f) Which photos of your work would you like featured?, and (g) What other social media accounts would you like listed on your website?

Next, each faculty member was videotaped, by one of the researchers, while discussing their research. The videos were later edited, by the same researcher, and added to each website. After receiving each faculty member's curriculum vitae, photos, and publication list, three website layout options per faculty were designed, for a total of 18 website layouts. Each faculty member chose their preferred layout, then information such as publications/presentations, awards, service, and press, were added to the website. The research team held one-on-one meetings with each faculty member to review progress on the development of the sites. Then final edits were made based on the discussions and the websites were then launched at a reception. Afterwards, each faculty member was asked to complete a short questionnaire with the following questions: (a) What did you know about academic branding prior to undergoing this process?, (b) What to you perceive is important about academic branding?, (c) What did you learn in the process of having your website developed?, (d) What was your experience like having an academic website developed? (e) How useful do you feel that your website will be for your career?, and (f) What would you have done differently, or would like to have been done differently for your website development process? The presentation will include a taxonomy of best practices and participants' answers to the questionnaire.

Significance. Personal branding can lead to professional and financial success (Khedher, 2014). Creating a personal brand via social networks or a personal website is a process that has many steps. An online presence needs to be contain social media accounts with personalized URLs that can be linked to other sites (Edmiston, 2014). After creating various social media accounts, you will need to promote your online presence by adding URLs to email signature blocks or business cards, all while managing and updating your brand presence (Edmiston, 2014). Having a personal brand is significant because it distinguishes individuals from their competition and it establishes credibility and recognition as an expert in their field which can yield new employment or professional opportunities (Montoya, 2002; McNally and Speak, 2002; Rein et al., 2006; Arudda and Dixon, 2007; Khedher, 2014).

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