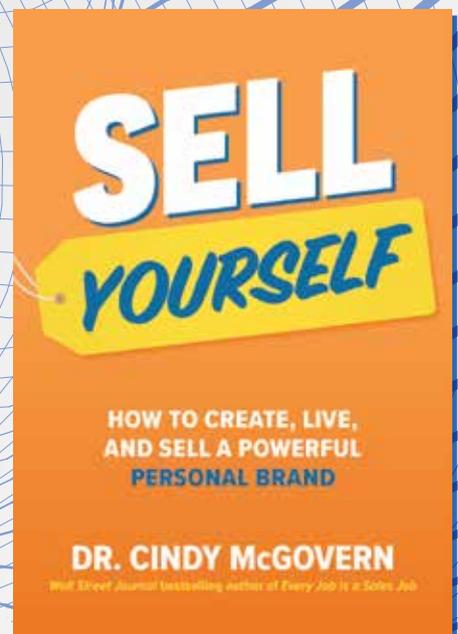

MINI CHAPTER

PERSONAL BRANDING FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS



Dr. Cindy



You're moving into a new stage of your life as a college student. As you check out your new teachers and classmates, be aware that they are checking you out, too.

How will they see you?

When you begin something new—a new situation with new people—you have the perfect opportunity to reinvent yourself. If you're staying on campus, this probably is the first time you have lived apart from your family.

What do you want to do that you never did before? Who do you want to be without parents and siblings looking over your shoulder? How do you want to present yourself to the world?

The answer to those questions will become the basis of your personal brand.

What is a personal brand?

A personal brand is how you present yourself to others. It's a plan for how you believe you should behave, speak to others, react to situations and show off your talents in a way that will help you achieve your goals. It's a guide that will keep you on track toward your goals.

Many people create a personal brand for the first time when they enroll in college. It's a coming-of-age activity that can help you establish the reputation you want to have; try out a style that you want others to know as your signature; and shake off any stigmas or mistakes that seemed to follow you wherever you went while you were in high school.

A new personal brand is a reflection of your fresh start.

Do you really need a personal brand?

Whether you think you need a personal brand or not, the fact is that you already have one. Every time someone meets you for the first time, you make a first impression. Based on that impression, the person forms an opinion about you.

In other words, that person decides what your personal brand is.

People might hear things about you, tell each other things about you, and then characterize you in a way that makes sense to them, given your reputation.

So if you haven't created a personal brand for yourself, that doesn't mean you don't have one. It means you have let others decide for you what it is.

Wouldn't it be better for you to decide for yourself what your brand is and then use it to establish the reputation you want?

As you start your college years, take ownership of how others see you. Create a personal brand that will guide your actions, words and appearance as you present yourself to your new community.

What goes into a personal brand?

To create a powerful personal brand that will help you get everything you want, you have to know what you want.

Your life as a college student will be much different from how it was when you were in high school, whether you continue to live with your family or you move into a campus dorm.

What do you want that:

- Is different from what you had in high school? Do you want to come out of your shell now that you're out from under the shadow of your family, friends and neighbors who have known you since you were in diapers?
- Will identify you as who you would like to become rather than as how others have always known you? For example, if others have always referred to you as Jonathan's kid sister, do you want to now be known for what is unique or awesome about you rather than for who you're related to?

Next, give serious thought to what you want to accomplish by going to college. Are you in it for the social life? As a springboard to medical or law school? To learn what it takes to start up a business? Only because your parents are insisting that you get a degree?

You'll want to design a personal brand to get you where you want to go. So depending on what you want to accomplish, your personal brand will look different from one that you might have created if your goals were different.

What if you're not sure of your goals?

Many college students really don't know yet how they want to spend the rest of their lives. That's OK; everybody's goals change as they reach new stages of life and success.

For now, focus on what you like and what you're good at. Create goals around:

Your superpowers. What are you so good at that people identify you with it? What are you better at than anyone else you know? For example, do you have a green thumb? A

unique style? A knack for technology? A way with animals? A professional demeanor? A quick wit?

Your personal brand should showcase your superpowers and help you remember to show them off whenever you meet someone who can help you succeed.

Your core values. These are your innermost ideals, principles and beliefs. No matter what else goes into your personal brand, it should include the qualities that make you "you," like helpfulness, kindness, honesty and authenticity.

Your dreams. What do you imagine yourself doing after college? Starting a career? Getting a Ph.D.? Having a family of your own? Changing the world? Taking over the family business? Craft a personal brand that will help you present yourself to the world in a way that will help you achieve that.

Your joy. Life is too short to get stuck in a role that makes you unhappy. Guard against that by identifying activities, people and things that bring you joy. What can you incorporate into your personal brand that will remind you to stay positive, appreciate your opportunities and incorporate happiness into every day—even a day at work. Make a list of 10 things—off the top of your head—that come to mind when you think "joy."

What's the hurry?

It's true that college can be a time of experimentation and an opportunity to spread your wings and try new things—even things your parents might not approve of.

The first year away from home absolutely will tempt you to stretch beyond the

social boundaries that your parents, teachers, clergy and even older siblings have set for you to keep you safe and on the right track.

Just remember how you could never live down that one embarrassing thing you did when you were a sophomore in high school. The same thing can happen in college.

But you're in a position to avoid that. If you create a personal brand now, it will help you present your best self right out of the gate, starting on the first day of freshman year.

Here's an example: Rashida and Tyrone were high school sweethearts and now attend the same college. Ty has a goal of someday becoming a well-known and respected researcher and perhaps a college professor. Rashida wants to be a physician assistant.

Both did well in high school and easily won admission to their state university. But Ty is excelling and Rashida is struggling.

Here's the difference: Ty dresses, acts and lives the part of a future sociologist and professor. Rashida looks, behaves and lives like all she wants to do is whatever her parents have always said she can't.

Ty wears nice clothes to school. On days when he has to give a presentation during class, he wears a blazer and button-down shirt. He rarely wears sneakers. Once quiet, he is making an effort to speak up more and has taken a leadership role in a student club.

Ty stands out to his professors as professional and self-aware. That has become his brand. It's what he's known for.

The first thing Rashida did when she moved into her dorm was to dye her ringlet-style hair extensions purple. She

got a tiny tattoo of a hummingbird on her ankle. She pierced her nose and one eyebrow. Always shy, she blends into the back of the classroom and rarely participates in class discussions.

Her professors, if they notice her at all, consider her just another freshman rebelling against the restrictions of her childhood. That has become Rashida's brand.

Ty is finding more opportunities to make a name for himself, build his portfolio and collect potential references for grad school and internship applications. Rashida, always a good student, likes her new look and is getting good grades but is not making connections or giving professors who could help her later the impression that she would make them proud if they referred her to work with colleagues in their field.

Does a personal brand mean you can't have fun?

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Admittedly, a powerful personal brand focuses more on achieving goals than on living in the moment. That doesn't mean people with serious personal brands can't be fun or have fun.

All of us are more than one thing. Ty impresses people with his commitment, work ethic, professionalism and maturity. But he loves to banter with professors about conspiracy theories; he goes to the gym every day and has made tons of workout-obsessed pals there; and he surprises Rashida every weekend with a thoughtful date night. Rashida's appearance screams "fun and funky," but she's extremely smart and reliable, and she's a thoughtful friend.

There is room in your personal brand for all of the facets of your personality. The key is to know when to elevate which facet. Rashida's purple hair and piercings might put off an

interviewer when she applies for a summer internship. Ty would never joke around about conspiracy theories with his all-business poli-sci professor, but his media instructor looks forward to their talks.

Read the room. Know when to elevate the facets of your personality that will convince others to help you, trust you and respect you.

How will today affect tomorrow?

Whichever qualities you decide to showcase as part of your personal brand, consider the consequences.

When Rashida died her hair, her public speaking professor asked her what her personal brand for college would be. She said she didn't know; she hadn't thought about it.

Then the professor asked her another question: Will having purple hair help you achieve your goals? Could it stand in your way?

To that professor, Rashida is "the girl with the purple hair." Without a personal brand to guide her, Rashida doesn't have a plan for how the impression she is making now might limit her later.

It's not that physician assistants can't have purple hair. And appearance, of course, is only one part of a robust personal brand that showcases talent, personality, capabilities and values. But like that misstep during high school that plagued you for the rest of your time there, the first impression you make on people can last forever. The professor who only sees purple hair might be willing to recommend Rashida for graduate school, but will she be comfortable referring her to a colleague who is looking for someone to work with patients?

Maybe. Maybe not.

Either way, consider: The impression you make today on professors, your boss at your part-time job and even your classmates could affect their willingness to help you in the future.

How about your social media brand?

Likewise, the impression you make on others who see your social media posts can affect you far into the future.

Look at Kevin Hart, who lost his shot at hosting the Oscars over some decade-old posts that some deemed homophobic. Walt Disney Studios fired writer/director James Gunn after 10-year-old tweets containing jokes about pedophilia and rape came to the attention of studio executives.

An increasing sensitivity to offensive language and bias, combined with the permanence of whatever you post online, makes you vulnerable to consequences if your social media contain insensitive jokes, revealing photos of yourself or comments that others could consider offensive.

Your social media presence should reflect the brand you create for yourself. If you want others to see you as a good candidate for scholarships, graduate school, internships or future jobs, showcase the facets of your personality that will make that impression on others, just as you would in person. Don't post the other stuff; keep that private and between friends.

As you try out a new style, a fun catch phrase or even slang terms that will help you fit in with a cool group of college friends, be aware of the reputation that others might assign you as a result.

How do you create a brand?

Once you have decided which goals you want to achieve, create a brand to help you get there. Ask yourself:

- How do people who have already achieved the same goals look, speak and behave? Can you comfortably mirror what they do?
- What would you have to change or add in order to present yourself as capable, qualified and good for the internship, job or role you aspire to?

Next, make a list of words that you would like others to use when they describe you: professional, smart, talented, skilled? Fun, stylish, unique, outgoing?

Are these the same words you would use to describe yourself? If not, is it possible for you to grow into a brand that includes those qualities?

The answers to these questions will help you make a plan for your brand. You might decide on a brand that you can't quite live up to yet because you don't have the skills. Can you acquire those skills by choosing classes that teach them? If one of your brand words is "leader," for example, can you join the Student Government Association to gain some experience running meetings and advocating for others? Can you enroll in a public speaking class that will teach you how to speak like a leader?

Your brand can be brief or long, but you should be able to describe it—and remember it—in a nutshell. Make it concise by assigning it some key words.

Then write those words down in a place where you will see them every day: on the first page of the notebook you carry

around, in your phone, on a sticky note attached to your bathroom mirror. Remind yourself of your brand every day and you will remember your goals and what you have to do to reach them.

What do I do with my brand after I create it?

You will use your brand every day to guide how you act, what you say and how you interact with others.

In other words, you will live your personal brand every single day. You make the impression you want to on others by presenting yourself to the world according to your brand. You will live up to your own expectations of yourself by remembering why you chose this brand and how it will help you succeed at college and in your future career.

And you will use your brand to sell yourself as perfect for the role you want to occupy at school and beyond.

Creating a personal brand doesn't do anything for you if you don't live it day in and day out. If you consistently live your brand, it will be easy to sell.

We all have to sell ourselves—constantly. You sell your professor on writing a recommendation for grad school. You sell your classmates on choosing you for their work/study group. You sell an interviewer on hiring you. You sell the internship coordinator on bringing you on board.

You sell yourself.

Treat that like a sale. And use your brand as a sales tool.

Then, learn how to sell.

How can you sell yourself effectively?

The best way to sell effectively is to use the skills and strategies that sales professionals use to sell their products.

An aside: If your reaction to that statement is, “Ick,” don’t worry. You don’t have to resort to dishonesty or manipulation to sell yourself. Those tactics have been out of style for years.

Instead, use a consultative selling approach. In other words, find out how what you’re selling—you—can benefit the person who might be buying, like a professor, an internship coordinator or a graduate school admissions officer.

Despite her purple hair, Rashida, for example, can determine whether the culture in the workplace of the medical office she wants to intern for is quiet and calm—two qualities her brand showcases. She is level-headed and rarely gets flustered. That kind of personality might be a perfect fit for this office. So that’s what she will sell.

In doing so, she gets what she wants and the office manager gets what he wants—an employee with good grades who fits in with the rest of the staff.

When what you have to sell will solve a problem or otherwise benefit the person or organization you’re trying to sell yourself to, that’s a win-win situation.

That’s a good sale.

You can plan to make win-win sales. Look for opportunities to sell. For example, Rashida might do some research about local medical offices and focus on the ones she knows her qualities match instead of trying to fit herself into a practice that might not be a good fit for her or for the practice.

That makes the search less time consuming because you are not choosing your potential “buyers” randomly.

Figuring out what you have to offer someone else helps you establish trust with that person. People like to buy from others whom they like and trust. Your willingness to fill a need will lead to trust.

Then, ask for what you want. It’s hard to ask someone to hire you or recommend you or do anything for you, really. But your chances of getting what you want are far higher if you ask than if you don’t.

Finally, once you make the sale—that is, you have used your brand as a sales tool and you have sold yourself into a job, internship, class, relationship or whatever it is that you want—be grateful. Show your gratitude to those who helped you get there. Keep your promises. Do what you said you would. Make yourself—and everyone who helped you—happy that they embraced your new personal brand.



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