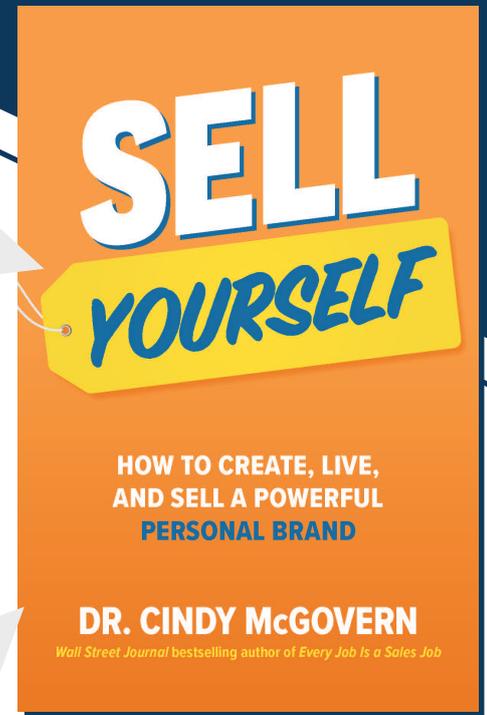


MINI CHAPTER

PERSONAL BRANDING FOR TEENAGERS

A Parent's Guide



Dr. Cindy

It's never too early to start building and protecting your good reputation. Parents: That's a lesson you can teach your teenagers.

The coming-of-age years your children spend in high school will determine whether they get into good colleges. These years will start your teens on the path that will determine what kind of adults they will become. These years will be full of achievement, sometimes embarrassment, and growth and development.

All of that will contribute to the reputation they will take with them to college, trade school or their first full-time jobs.

They don't know that. Most high school students are so busy navigating the changes to their bodies, dating, cliques, geometry, driving and college applications to consider that what they do today will affect whether they are successful tomorrow.

As the parent of a teenager, it might be up to you to introduce your child to the concept of personal branding. It might be up to you to help your teen create a personal brand that shines a light on his or her best qualities in a way that others will not be able to forget. It can be part of your parenting legacy to help your children create, live and sell their most powerful selves.

As a former college professor, I've met a lot of teenagers. Too often, my first thought was: Why don't they teach personal branding in high school? Everyone needs to know how to do it.

What is a personal brand?

A personal brand is how you present yourself to the world. It is a reflection of your best self, and of the talents, skills, personality traits and values that will ultimately make you successful in life and at work. A personal brand is like a road map that will keep you on track as you pursue your goals and dreams.

A personal brand is precisely what every teenager needs to create and live up to as teachers, classmates, neighbors and supervisors at part-time jobs create an impression and decide whether to write a recommendation letter, make a referral to a friend or colleague, or otherwise lend a helping hand.

Many people create a first personal brand when they start college. But starting that process in high school can help a teenager get into a good college or land a good job during a gap year or in lieu of higher education.

A personal brand is a tool that can help high school students present themselves in a way that will help them achieve whatever they want to do next.

Isn't high school a bit early for branding?

Granted, high school is a time for teens to enjoy the last, lingering days of childhood as they discover who they are and who they want to become. But youthful missteps and unflattering reputations have a way of living on long after graduation day, especially in this unforgiving digital age.

Why not help your kids purposely create the reputations they want in high school and beyond? Why not nudge them toward creating the kind of personal brand that will help keep them on track to reach their goals by making them conscious of the lasting impact of what they say and how they behave?

Does my kid really need a personal brand?

Your children already have personal brands, whether they, or you, realize it or not.

Even as kids, we wound up with nicknames based on how we behaved or how others perceived us: Stinky, Bad Boy, Stuck Up, Teacher's Pet. The kind, beautiful girl who never combed her hair isn't remembered as kind or beautiful. The genius who got the best grades year after year but ate paper at his desk isn't remembered for his brains. The frail girl who fainted at Assembly in the second grade was still known as a fainter in the eighth grade, even though she never fainted again. The girl who cried in front of the whole class when it was her turn to sing the National Anthem in front of everyone never lived that down.

A personal brand is simply what others think about you. People who do not deliberately create a personal brand and use it as a guide for how they behave, speak to others and react to situations leave what others think of them up to chance. Those who take the time to create a thoughtful personal brand control that narrative.

Do you want to leave your teenager's reputation to chance? Or do you want your child to have a plan for how to

behave, speak and react that will build the kind of reputation that will help him or her make friends, impress teachers, ace college admission interviews and generally be seen in a positive light?

Is a personal brand realistic for a teenager?

A good personal brand, if your teen lives up to it consistently, is a constant reminder that certain kinds of behavior can be a benefit and other behaviors can cause harm. A personal brand showcases everything that is good about the student, like talent, intellect, values and personality, and minimizes any negatives, like a quick temper, a bad habit or a lazy streak.

Teenagers who take the time to create their personal brands become aware of how what they say and do can hurt them or help them achieve specific goals. So they think twice before going off brand. They consider their words and actions before speaking or doing. They present themselves in the way they have decided will gain them the reputation that they want.

Yes, it can be hard to stay on brand—to live your brand—day in and day out, and not just for teenagers. Look at all of the celebrities in their 20s, 30s, 40s and beyond who have killed their careers by saying or posting something uncharacteristically snarky or mean or phobic. Sometimes those comments were youthful indiscretions that resurfaced decades later.

Anyone who creates a powerful personal brand and lives up to it every day—at any age—has to make some sacrifices to maintain a good reputation. That can be especially hard for

teenagers who face peer pressure to act out, experiment and even get into trouble, all in the name of fun and friendship. As a parent, you can make your high schooler aware that a good reputation is easier to live with than a bad one—and that it only takes one bad act to ruin a good reputation.

What is involved in branding?

Your teenager will need your help to create a powerful personal brand.

Start the conversation by focusing on the teen's goals, both short term and long term. A personal brand can help your teen achieve those goals. You can't achieve goals if you don't know what your goals are, after all.

Short-term goals might include things like making the basketball team, getting a date with a cute classmate, earning straight As this quarter or acing the SATs. Long-term goals could be getting into a favorite college, pledging a sorority, becoming a journalist or running for office.

Once those goals are clear, you can help your future superstar figure out what the people who have successfully achieved those goals have in common. Do they dress a certain way? Are their personalities similar? What credentials do they have? Is their outlook positive or pessimistic? What words would people use to describe them?

Does your child have those qualities? Could he? What would it take? Hard work? A wardrobe makeover? Losing a bad habit or forming a good one? Practice at making small talk? Working on becoming more outgoing?

Creating a personal brand is like making a plan to succeed. What does your child have to do to make the team? Practice shooting free throws every day? Reach out to the coach? Ask players to put in a good word? Show up for basketball camp every day pre-tryouts ready to work hard?

Brand planning will help your teen understand what to do to reach the goal. Next, you can help her decide if what she has to do is what she is willing to do and what she is capable of doing.

I often wonder how much faster or further I might have accomplished my goals if I had had a mentor or parent who helped me create a personal brand during my teenage years. You have the chance to help your children get ahead of the game here.

Students without defined goals tend to accomplish less in high school and start college or first jobs with fewer credentials, less experience and a lack of post-graduation support from teachers and others who can help with references, advice and introductions.

Students without personal brands tend to leave high school not having made much of an impression on those potential helpers—or perhaps with an impression they wish they hadn't made.

How else can I help?

As a parent, you probably know your child better than anyone. It's hard to make a false impression on someone who has known you since you were born.

Because of that, you are the best person to hold a mirror up to your teenager and to offer feedback on whether he or she is making the desired impression on others.

Here's a useful exercise: Ask your teens to write down five words that they hope others will use to describe them. At the same time, write down five words that you would use to describe them. Then, compare lists.

Be honest. So often, people think they are making one impression on others when they actually are making quite a different one.

If your teens have shared their personal brands with you, you're in a good position to remind them that they have identified certain behaviors as being helpful or harmful to their effort to achieve their goals. When you see them going off brand, nudge them back on track.

Perhaps most important is to remind your teens that if they don't live their brands consistently, others will assume what those brands are. Not living your brand doesn't mean you don't have one. It just means you're not the one controlling what it is.

Is a social media brand the same as a personal brand?

Your teen's personal brand on social media should reflect the brand he or she has created in an effort to achieve short- and long-term goals.

Social media might seem like a place to be free and casual with comments and photos, to let the guard down and to be irreverent with comments to close

friends. But that off-brand behavior, when posted online, lives forever and can harm a reputation far quicker than it takes to establish one.

Parents can help their teens avoid reputation-busting social media blunders by following them and advising them when their posts are off brand. You also can help your high schooler understand the permanence of social media posts and that even inside jokes among friends with privacy settings can find their way out of an inner circle—even years from now.

If you want others to see your teen as a good candidate for a good college, scholarships, internships or future jobs, help him or her stay on brand on social media.

That's not to say you want to turn your kid into a robot with a lifestyle that's too stringent to keep up with. Still, a parent can put up guardrails and issue friendly reminders as often as is needed that what happens today can last through tomorrow and beyond.

What does my teenager do with the brand once it's created?

Creating a personal brand is the first of three steps that, combined, will make it powerful. The second step is to live the brand. If the brand is thoughtful and authentic, this will be easy for a teenager to do. Brands incorporate personality traits and values that come naturally. But they also reflect aspirations that your child will have to grow into.

Some great advice to offer to your teen: Live as if you have already achieved your goals. It might feel like “faking it” for a while but living “as if” will inspire the high schooler to keep moving forward to becoming the person he or she wants to be.

The third step for teens with personal brands is to “sell” their brands; that is, to use their brands as a sales tool to sell themselves.

Did you just say, “Ick?” Or maybe your teenager will when you present

personal branding through the lens of sales. You can reassure your kids that selling themselves does not have to involve bragging, lying or manipulating anyone. It’s about discovering how what they have to offer can benefit others, including teachers, coaches, classmates, employers and even their parents.

If your teen is living the brand, it will be easy to sell. Keeping the brand top of mind every day will help anyone remember short- and long-term goals and the plan for achieving them.

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