

Your Personal Brand

By Mark Zust



Like it or not, most people will size you up in five seconds, or less. In his provocative book *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell makes a strong case for snap judgments and how they impact our daily lives and society as a whole. Scientists call these judgments “think slicing” and there’s compelling research that shows the near-instantaneous decisions we all make are often the same as the impressions we form after a considerable length of time. Gladwell references the research of a Tufts University professor, who focused on the snap judgments people make based on verbal and non-verbal cues provided by appearance, gender, personality and relationships. In this study, it took two seconds for the people tested to develop a strong, lasting first impression. Two seconds! So, does your personal brand send the right message, right now? If not, you’ll be spending lots of time and money undoing that less-than-positive first impression. It’s much easier and a lot more efficient if you get it right the first time.

The best place to start as a positive brand ambassador for your company is with your personal brand. What messages are you sending to the world long before you open your mouth? Many people think it’s enough to wear the well-tailored, conservative suit and blend in. Maybe so, but is that what you want, to blend in, to be invisible? The people who make a lasting impression, who are remembered and talked about, are the ones who continue to make connections, advance and enjoy ongoing success. Success doesn’t come from being bland, forgettable and meek. As the old saying goes: “The meek shall inherit the poor.”

If you want your brand to stand out, YOU have to stand out.. Consider what your physicality, clothing, overall appearance, demeanor, language and attitude projects to the rest of the world. These are all areas you can control and refine, and it starts with awareness. Today, in our media-clogged, celebrity-obsessed society, it’s not nearly enough to just be polite and blend in.

Consider making one or more of these simple changes right now so you can start changing perceptions:

1. **Think of your clothes as packaging.** Does your corporate uniform say “old reliable” or “new and improved”? Mix it up, take a chance, be more stylish and watch what happens.
2. **Embrace your body.** Stop fighting what you think is a body type limitation. Celebrate it! I know a young executive who is short, has very broad shoulders and a barrel chest. Rather than wear “slimming” colors and patterns, he makes it a point of wearing broadly striped, well tailored suits that make him look a bit like a tough in a Dick Tracy cartoon. You know what? He looks confident, he wears it well, and you can see him coming from 20 yards away! It’s an appropriate look for a networker who loves to connect people and resources. What do your clothes telegraph about you and your value to the world?
3. **Look different.** If you wear contacts, trade them in for distinctive glasses that frame your face. Try on colors that show off your profile or add an unexpected splash to an otherwise boring business suit. If everyone else in your office wears a necktie, wear suspenders. Or a bowtie. If this is too outrageous for you, then try a pocket square. Ladies, add a distinctive scarf or heirloom jewelry or a funky vintage accessory that says “I’m not just another empty suit”.

4. **Change your 'Do** - If you've never considered hair style as an iconic branding device, think Dolly Parton, Donald Trump, even James Carville or Michael Jordan.
5. **Keep your look consistent.** Once you've found a color palette, suit style, accessory range and hairstyle that works for you, stick with it. Sure, you can refine it to fit changing styles, but within the range of what looks good for you, projects the right message, and most importantly, makes you feel comfortable. If you can't do this for yourself, then enlist a stylish friend who knows you well and is willing to tell you honestly what works and what doesn't.

For more than 25 years Mark has helped companies large and small get the most from their brand investment by providing brand tune-ups, overhauls and everything in between. That's why business owners call Mark the "brand mechanic". He is available for brand evaluation, consulting, messaging and team training. For details, visit www.zustco.com. To schedule a meeting with Mark to discuss your brand, call Zust and Company at 440-777-8373.

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