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MAKE YOUR MARK

To get ahead today, you need to be your own brand. **BELINDA ARCHER** meets the experts who can make you more marketable

What do Oprah Winfrey, Madonna and Paris Hilton have in common? Nationality? Unusual names? Too much money?

The main similarity is their strong personal brands. Each is known for something very specific, whether it be 'advocate for women', 'queen of reinvention' or, in the case of Ms Hilton, 'partying blonde heiress'.

'Personal branding' is the new buzz phrase rapidly spreading across the business world from the US, where it began. It involves working out exactly what differentiates you from the competition, and then promoting that image – just as big corporations have done for decades. And promoters of the concept believe that those who develop and manage their own 'Brand Me' have an edge in the marketplace.

Branding expert Lesley Everett makes a strong case. 'Personal branding is basically the words people use to describe you to other people,' she says. 'Your personal brand is out there, whether you have developed it or not.' So you might as well develop it.

Danielle Heffernan, a psychologist at the Mind Gym, which specialises in transforming the way people feel and think at work, adds: 'If you don't intentionally create it yourself, you could be labelled wrongly by others.'

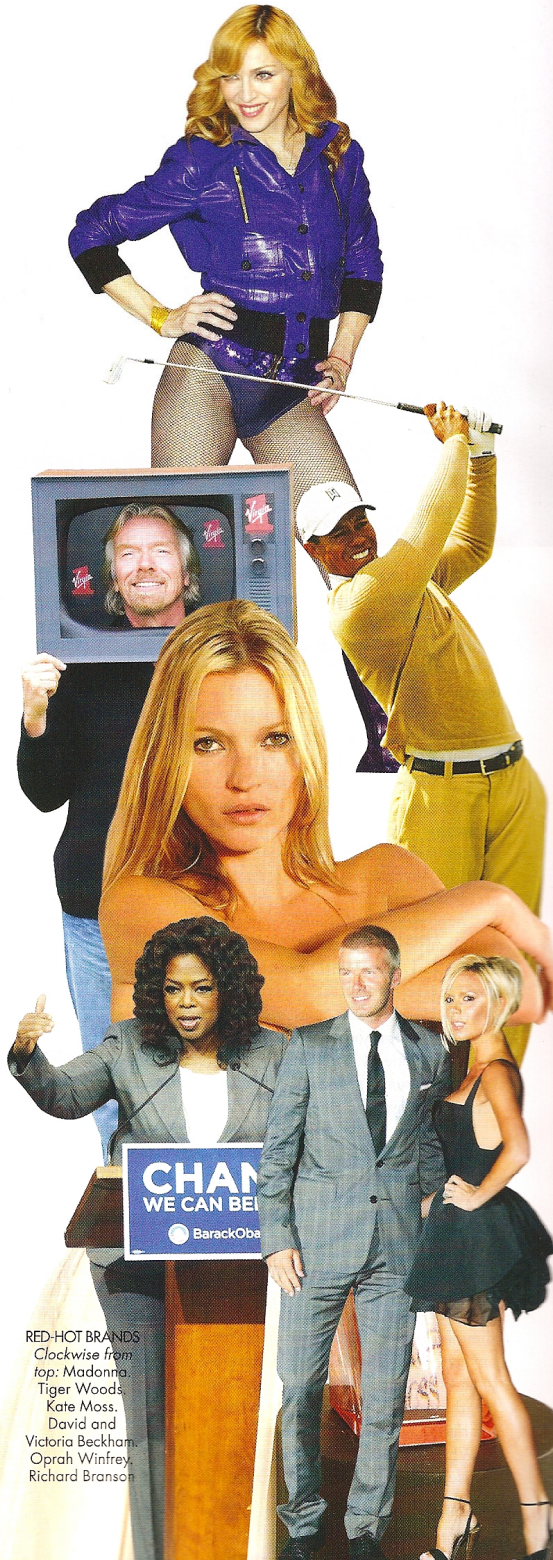
Louise Mowbray, founder of image and personal-branding consultancy Mowbray by Design, says: 'People usually give three elements to describe a person to someone else: who they are, what they do, and some sort of perception of them. In effect, they are branding that person. But personal branding is not about creating a new brand for ourselves; it is about managing our own brand better.'

To embark on a personal-branding journey, you must first do a bit of soul-searching, say the experts. What would you like people to think of you? What makes you special?

'The first step is to look at your core values, your unique strengths, drivers and motivators,' says Everett, who has written a book about personal branding, *Drop Dead Brilliant* (£9.99, McGraw-Hill Professional). 'You need real clarity to establish who you are as a brand.'

But you also need to be honest and realistic. 'It's got to be something that comes naturally,' says Heffernan. 'Something that you can live and breathe when no one is looking.'

The next stage is to ask people what they think – colleagues,



RED-HOT BRANDS

Clockwise from top: Madonna, Tiger Woods, Kate Moss, David and Victoria Beckham, Oprah Winfrey, Richard Branson

FIVE WAYS TO BRAND YOURSELF

employees, peers, clients, anyone who knows you well enough to comment. This might be uncomfortable, but it is a key step in the process. However, you need structure to do it.

'A good question to ask is, "What do I do for you?"' says Everett. 'A client might say things like, "You always motivate me." You need honest feedback.' One senior female in the retail sector boiled her job down to: 'When companies merge, I sort out the mess.' This was interpreted as 'Creates vision out of chaos' – a descriptor she could work with.

Coming up with the equivalent of an advertising strapline is also handy. Or, if you were to write your life history now, think what would be the title of the book. New York-based William Arruda, a former IBM marketing executive, is one of the world's leading personal branders. He takes the personal strapline idea a step further: 'Think of this as something like repositioning a tired toothpaste brand. You need a presence as distinctive as the Nike swoosh.' When researching a client, Arruda polls friends and colleagues with questions such as: 'If she were a car, which would she be?'

The Mind Gym's 90-minute Me Plc Workout involves pushing people to discover what they want to be known for. 'They come away with a one-liner that sums them up,' says Heffernan. Richard Branson's one-liner, for example, might be 'Entrepreneur who can make things happen', while Tiger Woods' might be 'Best golfer in the world' – we know that is not necessarily the case, but his name is cleverly, and automatically, linked with that statement.

After all this self-discovery, you need to work out a strategy for how to communicate your newly crafted personal brand to the marketplace. Not surprisingly, personal appearance is crucial. 'First impressions are so important, so your exterior really counts,' says Heffernan. 'But your behaviour is critical, too.'

Mowbray says: 'Image is a part of it. We make up our minds very quickly about someone. But only seven per cent of what we communicate to other people is the words we use. It's about seeing and hearing, our body language and tone of voice.'

Adopting a branding device can be useful too. Arruda

1 Be virtually visible Being Googled is the 21st-century version of the reference check. Manage your online profile – build a website, update your Facebook entry, start a blog. And Google yourself weekly to see if anything new has been put up about you.

2 Mimic another well-known brand Market yourself as 'the new Nicola Horlick' or 'Britain's Martha Stewart' – someone who has already made it – with a twist.

3 Think small Look at everything, from your website to your business cards, email signature, mobile voice message – even the way you answer the phone. Make sure it is all on-brand.

4 Give speeches Seek out speaking engagements at industry events to boost your visibility to potential employers and clients. Being visible is key to getting on in business today.

5 Don't do anything until you are sure Once you are out in the marketplace, it is hard to pull back, so make sure you are happy with your positioning beforehand.

recommends 'trademarks' such as only using the very latest Apple laptop, or only holding meetings at trendy venues.

Everett, for example, called her company Walking Tall as a reflection on her height – she is just 5' 1 1/2". Her logo is a giraffe. But she cautions against taking it too far. 'If you want to be known for being fashionable, then accessorise really well. That's fine. But I worked with a lady in the US who liked to wear purple, from her bag to her shoes and even her hair-grips. It was too much.'

The trademark must be 'on brand' for it to work. Branson's signature pullovers work because he has a man-in-the-street approach to business. Another personal-branding pupil signs letters in turquoise ink, which is perfect for his 'quirky lawyer' message.

An online presence is also of paramount importance. As Arruda says: 'If you don't show up on Google, you don't exist.' So if it is appropriate for your brand, develop a personal website, make sure your name comes up on search engines, keep your profile updated on social networking sites – and Google yourself regularly to check what is up there about you: if you don't like something, get it deleted. Also, lose the comedy email address. 'Skatergirl' or 'Miss Pompom' won't impress anyone. 'Prospective and current employers considering promoting you will be Googling you to see what is being said,' says Everett. 'Be aware of your online presence, and be proactive.'

But isn't this all going a bit far? Can we really treat individuals like a tin of baked beans? Ceri Richards, managing director of specialised industry finance for Bank of Scotland Corporate, is convinced. Having undergone a course with Walking Tall, she says: 'Personal branding is not about treating people as products. Personal presentation makes a statement that is immediate and powerful, and it is better to manage that proactively. Canny people have always done it, without recognising it now has a label.'

The final word from the converts is that every single thing you do – or don't do – communicates the value and character of your own special brand. And consistency is king.

'Personal branding embraces everything, from your clothes to the way you make phone calls, your handshake, body language, even your letterhead,' says Mowbray. 'The thing that matters most is you. People make companies. People are the real brands.'

So go on, Google yourself now and get started on your own personal branding. It could be an enlightening, as well as ultimately useful, experience. □

BRAND CAMP

Three courses that can help you manage your own personal brand:

The Mind Gym's Me Plc Workout The Mind Gym's psychologists hold 90-minute sessions for in-house-only groups of 20. Participants also do some work on their own and 'still have their own individual journey'.

The Mind Gym (020 7376 0626; www.themindgym.com), £1,500 for a 90-minute Me Plc Workout for 20 people (£75 a head).

Mowbray by Design Mowbray by Design offers one-on-one personal-branding coaching. Founder Louise Mowbray works with people in the public eye, from politics to sport, media to business. Meetings are held once a month for at least three months. The first session lasts 90 minutes, with subsequent sessions each being an hour long.

Mowbray by Design (07768 002840; www.mowbraybydesign.com), £1,200 for an initial three-month programme.

Walking Tall Walking Tall holds courses in-house, catering for groups of any size. It also runs open courses, which anyone can attend. Clients receive help on image and dress, and have to do work in advance, getting feedback on their personal brands.

One-on-one coaching is available for senior CEOs and company directors. *Walking Tall (01344 427977; www.walkingtall.org), £582 for a one-day group workshop.*