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Create a positive personal brand

Here is a portion of the conversation. An extended version appears at chicagolawyer.com

What does personal branding mean?

Tina Martini: Personal branding can have a variety of meanings. Some use the term to refer to one's reputation, others as the way in which you market yourself. I believe it is a combination of both of these things and much more. It is carving a niche for yourself that aligns with your personal and professional talents and passions and authentically showcases you and what you stand for. It is a truthful reflection of different facets of who you are, your personality, your skill set and what makes you different. Your personal brand is demonstrated in the way you present yourself, how you interact with people and how they feel about you. In essence, it is all about packaging and projecting what makes you special, both as a professional and as an individual.

David Susler: I would describe it as the way you present yourself to the world. It is a broadly encompassing concept, including both your physical image and your substantive abilities. It is the way you dress — wearing bold ties or colorful pocket squares in your suit coats, even the look of your business cards. It is also the nature and quality of your work and how you treat others. It is the image of yourself you create in other's minds, so that when they think of you, ideally the thoughts are positive.

How can personal branding improve your position?

Martini: Personal branding can help you raise your profile in the community. It enables you to more clearly define who you are, where your talents and interests lie and to more carefully focus on what is most important to you. This is better than having a more general, scattered approach and trying to be everything to

everybody. While it is important to be known for a mosaic of skills and expertise, it is more important to have a devoted following who like, respect and want to work with you than to have a lot of people know of you but have no idea who you really are. If people can relate to you and like you, they not only will work with you but will talk about you with others, which will attract even more of the people and professional experiences you want.

Susler: Exactly, so the next question is how to create a positive personal brand that will endure and help improve your position. The first step is making a positive first impression. People generally form their impression of you within seconds to minutes of meeting you, and it is extremely difficult to change their perceptions, so make sure you are creating a good first impression. How do you do that? Look successful, act successful, be successful. The easy part is to dress for success — if you look successful, people will think you are. But it is much more than that. You need to be able to sustain your image over time. Without the substance to back it up, an initially positive impression will quickly fade. Thus, you must consistently deliver the goods and conduct yourself professionally. For example, treat others with civility, do good work, help others and conduct yourself honestly and ethically. You will both create and sustain an exemplary personal brand that people will notice.

What are the challenges with personal branding?

Martini: As with everything in life, things that offer great rewards present risk. Personal branding is no different. If you are risk averse, you will have a more difficult time in developing and showcasing your personal brand. However, if you are willing to strategically take risks, stand apart from the rest and be true

to yourself, you will encounter people and experiences you may not have otherwise. This will help you grow as a person and as a professional. Effective personal branding takes a lot of effort and time. It must also be authentic, which means that there is a certain amount of self-reflection and soul-searching that needs to happen first. There is a natural inclination to avoid the hard work and to simply mimic someone you know who is successful and who has what you want. In the long run, this approach lacks authenticity and people can sense it a mile away.

Personal branding must also be dynamic and fresh so that others do not get bored and think of you as a one-trick pony. As you evolve, both as a person and as a professional, your personal brand should likewise evolve. In the process, it is important to strike that delicate balance between being interesting and multifaceted and being seen as schizophrenic. Honesty and self-awareness are key in successfully accomplishing this goal.

Susler: In a very practical way, the Internet and social media can be extremely powerful and effective in establishing your brand, but they can also be a challenge. You cannot necessarily control what others say or post about you, so you need to be vigilant about always maintaining your brand. Be aware of what others say about you — occasionally search your name on the Internet, for example.

I have always said that I have two things of value: my law license and my reputation. If I lose either one, I'm done. My reputation is the most important element of my personal brand. The challenge is to avoid doing things, even unintentionally, that put either of these in jeopardy. ■

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