

opinion

Teachers' personal branding

Carefully tend to what defines you



by Miquel Rossy

Blanca was a high school geography and history teacher. It had been nine years since she had arrived in a small town in inland Catalonia. She started as a teacher just after finishing her degree in humanities. The years went by and little by little she passed the professional growth phase. Every year her experience and reputation grew.

The students knew her well. She didn't need to raise her voice; a small gesture was enough to silence the boy who was talking loudly with his classmate. Everyone knew she didn't like to shout. She created a calm working atmosphere: she made demands on the students without jeopardising her good relationship with each of them.

Blanca's parents had grown older and now her mother, who had Parkinson's disease, required more attention. So, the whole family had to move back to the city where she was born. And of course, Blanca and her two children had to change schools. She got a job at the school she had attended. Her colleagues included some of the teachers

who had taught her! She thought the change would be easy. In the end, she felt at home in that teacher's lounge that had witnessed her complaints about grades, conversations about her professional future and the occasional teary confidence with a teacher...

The school year began. She was not surprised that from the start the students tried to test her to see how far they could go. It is their job, of course. She was counting on the fact that she was still a new teacher to them and had already been through that. What did surprise her, however, was the realisation that she was finding it much more difficult to get them to be quiet and attentive. Her usual tricks weren't working!

For example, she was surprised that staring at a distracted

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student was not enough to make him change his attitude and get down to work. She continually had to ask them to be quiet. Especially with the secondary students, she had to start punishing those who repeatedly spoke out, stood up or questioned the work she asked them to do.

Even in tutoring sessions, the students did not trust her the way they did at the other school. She could see it in the looks in their eyes, and in their lack of interest during personal conversations. And this had always been her strongest point. At the other school she had a great reputation as an adviser...

What had worked until then stopped working!
Blanca then understood what it meant to have a personal brand. She had experienced firsthand. She had to start building her own reputation again! She had to go back to being a branding teacher, a branded teacher.


DO YOU HAVE A PERSONAL BRAND?

We all have a personal brand, even if we don't work at

it. Personal branding is not just for athletes, singers and movie stars. We have a personal brand as people exposed to other's judgment, as all teachers are. Whether we like it or not, we are always communicating and being judged. Students and families are always looking at us. This is why we have a brand even if we are doing no "branding", that is, deliberately guiding and consolidating our brand. Our brand, in short, is how we are seen.

Talking about personal branding is certainly a call for personal growth. It is obvious that if we improve personally, we also improve our brand. But your brand is not just about wanting to improve as a teacher. Your brand is not the way you are, but the mark you leave on others. Your brand is what is projected about you.

Your personal brand as an educator is the reflection of your identity –your way of being, your convictions and your purpose– in your students through your behaviour that is consistent with it.



Any brand is a communicative act; in fact, it is the synthesis of all communication that reaches us about a person or an organisation. Every communicative act consists of constructing a sign: a material element that we capture through our senses will signify an emotional or conceptual reality. Thus, all brands are signs. It doesn't matter what type of brand it is: corporate, personal, city, country... All brands work the same. In fact, personal branding is not actually a transfer of corporate brands to people, as many people think. The first brands, communicatively speaking, are actually personal brands. We all continually make judgments about others, starting from our very first contact. Basically we judge their affinity with us and their competency, as well as whether we can trust them.

Whenever we educate, we are communicating. This is a truism: there is no education without communication. We educate first with our words (that is, with our planned communication); that is, we carry out part of our teaching task through words: we instruct and equip students with knowledge. But we especially educate –share wisdom– through our behaviour, our example, the coherence between what we are and how we act.

Therefore, a personal brand is more a sign than a symbol. There are very simple signs, such as road signs. However, a brand sign is complex. And personal brands are particularly complex, because, after all, people are complex, or, to put it positively, we are rich.

The work of personal branding consists precisely of simplifying the sign to make it more obvious. It can be simplified in the signifier, in the things we grasp through the senses, by limiting them to the minimum: institutional brands are limited to a single colour, a single typeface, a single “claim”, a single image. However, it is very difficult for us to effect this simplification in the classroom, where we are observed by students at all times, down to our most insignificant details.

We can simplify the sign and build our brand by avoiding contradictions in meaning; that is, after having reflected on our identity, we should express it coherently, or rather live it coherently. This requires knowing who we are, what we believe in and what we want to achieve in order to set goals that reflect our identity.

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