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Your Career: Developing Your "personal Brand"

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NEW YORK (AP) -- A little self promotion on [Twitter](#), and a short time later David Mathison sold 5,000 copies of his book.

Mathison's story demonstrates the potential for personal branding. He's got one -- "Be the Media," the name of his book and Web site. The book is a manual on how to create and distribute content in today's networked world, and Mathison sold them to a woman who had started following him and his brand on the popular microblogging service.

They communicated through Twitter, then he "friended" her on [Facebook](#). They eventually met in person, and she purchased the books for her foundation to distribute to college journalism programs.

"That really comes from maximizing the use of not just Twitter, but also Facebook," he said. "All of the places that my brand was available."

Personal branding doesn't necessarily mean having a tag line or logo, although those can be elements of a branding strategy. In fact, for many people, it may just be their names. It's all about sending a message that tells the world who you are and what you can do.

The phrase "personal branding" has been tossed around for more than a decade, but gained recent momentum as online social networking burst into the mainstream. It has also gotten a boost from the rising unemployment rate, as career advisers encourage job seekers to develop their names into brands and use various online tools to promote their careers.

"It's how we market ourselves to other people," said Dan Schawbel, who operates a blog dedicated to the concept called [personalbrandingblog.com](#), and recently published "Me 2.0," a book on the topic.

It starts with developing a sense of how you want to present yourself to the world and who your target audience is-- potential employers, clients or readers, for instance. Then it requires putting together a way to share that message.

For Mathison, it has meant pulling together social networking, a Web site and blog, personal appearances and other efforts to build upon his career in the publishing industry and establish himself as a sought-after expert.

But his success doesn't mean everyone must try to be omnipresent online.

"I think every person has to take an honest look at their own life and find a branding strategy that's going to fit into their own lifestyle," said Cheryl Lynch Simpson, a career coach and resume writer who runs Executive Resume Rescue in Westerville, Ohio. "Twitter is not going to make sense for everybody."

In other words, quality can be as important as quantity. "I think you have to choose your tools wisely and stick with it," Simpson said.

You may start by simply crafting a phrase, or branding statement, that clearly describes yourself and your work, and use it on your resume, your business card and in your e-mail signature. "People keep try to sell themselves in 3,000 different directions without a strategy," she said.

What's most important, said Alex Douzet, president and co-founder of the executive job site TheLadders.com, "is that everything that's about you that's out there has to be consistent."

He advocates trying to develop a personal brand early in a career -- even as a student -- as a way to provide direction. "Create a vision," he said. "The more clarity you arrive around your values, your visions and what your brand statement is, it's easier for you to make decision when an opportunity comes your way."

That doesn't mean personal branding has to lock you into a specific career path. Someone might start off thinking he or she wants to work for a large company, Douzet said, but after time in the work force discover it's better to run a small business.

"It's fine for the brand statement to evolve over time," he said. "What you don't want is a brand statement that changes every year," like that kid in college who's changing majors every semester.

Personal branding also includes in-person tactics, for instance the way you describe yourself to a new contact at a networking event. Simpson advocates preparing "personal commercials," or ways to present "the most pertinent elements of your brand in little sound bites."

One important element is keeping the professional and the personal as separate as possible, said Mathison. That might mean efforts like maintaining different Facebook pages for business relationships and actual friends and family.

"You've got to be really careful," he said. Both because of immediate concerns like identity theft and personal safety, along with the need to maintain a professional image associated with your name, it's necessary to think twice before letting the world know about your vacation or other personal details.

Given the role online communication is playing now and its likely continued growth, Schawbel said if you're not comfortable blogging or posting Web videos, you should develop those skills, particularly if you're a consultant or an entrepreneur.

You never know, for instance, when someone who read a blog post, then linked on a social networking site could present a job or business opportunity, much like Mathison's book sale.

"Communication is key," Schawbel said. "Because that's how you network and get jobs."