

# Master Your Brand

## How Personal Is Your Professional Network?

The finest brand you can build for yourself is one that combines elements from your professional and personal life. In fact, your professional brand *is* your personal brand more and more these days, and your personal brand is your professional brand. They're one and the same, and will continue to be as people find greater opportunities to balance life and work.

The days of working 9 to 5 and living a closed-off, private life after-hours are finished. Social media marketing has allowed us all to share more of ourselves than ever before. Most people choose to leave some things unshared—there are still topics that won't reach the outside world.

I believe, however, that the future world-changers are those who have learned to leverage all life events—from workplace successes to family challenges, and even health issues. Filling in the gray areas with vibrant colors or truths for the world to see is what creates lasting, likable impressions, and it is what will keep your brand top-of-mind.

I inadvertently put this concept to the test in my own life. A longtime colleague and friend, **Mary Silva**, reached out to me because she was going to be in the Washington, D.C., area and wanted to connect while in town. Mary lives in Louisville, Kentucky, and has a 27-year background in the printing industry and as a business development and territory manager for major and national accounts. We met when I was working as a marketing coordinator for the Smithsonian Institution, and she called on me as a client. We've been friends for a long time, and I've grown quite fond of the time we share together.

During her trip, she had many clients to call on, which made it challenging for us to connect. Mary finally found some time in her schedule, but I had a personal commitment—Bible study at my church.

Once I saw Mary, however, I knew we'd end up talking for hours. On impulse, I asked her if she would like to have an authentic worship experience with Virginia's oldest African-American Baptist congregation. She said yes.

Mary is a Catholic, and while she had always wanted to experience a Protestant service, she had never found the time to do so—until now.

She thoroughly enjoyed herself at my church, and the congregants welcomed her with open arms. She thanked the congregation for welcoming her, and appreciated my invitation.

**W**e left Bible study for dinner, and the discussion we had was greater than any we had before. We exchanged lots of ideas, industry insights, and family updates. We spent a great deal of time talking about Search Engine Marketing (SEM), and how print is very much alive with many large companies on certain campaigns that don't lend themselves to electronic campaigns.

I helped Mary understand the challenges small businesses face with direct mail, and how printing and postage remains an expense that many are not able to sustain long enough to enjoy a return on their marketing investment. We each left with a list of things to do for each other, and I have faith that we will complete those tasks. Mary said she wants to worship with me again when she comes in town next time, and of course she is always welcome.

The takeaway in this column is that whether you're a small business owner, a corporate champion of diversity and procurement, or an advertiser, people do business with those they know, like, and trust. I was happy to take my



Silva

friendship with Mary to a new level, considering she had never seen me in a "personal" setting. She and I have known each other for years, always liked each other, and never had an issue trusting one another. Our recent outing can only enhance that relationship, just as spending greater quality time with your professional contacts can take yours to the next level.

I have forged similar relationships with other professional contacts. I've golfed with contacts, dined with contacts, and gone on trips with contacts. We've fished together, and I've been a passenger on a client's airplane. I've been to weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies with clients. Many of them call me just to talk, and I sometimes call them for the same reason. We shoot the breeze, go to black-tie affairs, and even swap personal items. I've been to their homes; they've been to mine. I have done many interesting things with my professional contacts.

You don't have to take them to worship services, but there are likely other areas that might help you grow together. When you take a chance on building an authentic personal brand for yourself, you'll find that your professional career can and will benefit automatically. ♦

**Akia T. Garnett** is a national columnist for **MBE** magazine. She is the president and CEO of *Brand-builder*; a national speaker; and adjunct professor of marketing, consumer behavior and business for Trinity University, Washington, D.C. Garnett is



the coauthor of *Seen and Sustained: Best Practices in Communication for Small and Diverse Businesses*, a professional development workbook. She is a

member of Mt. Zion Baptist Church of Arlington, Virginia. Dr. Leonard N. Smith is her pastor.