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## BRAND U

*Leveraging Your College Years to Get a  
Great Job When You Graduate*

Joe Mayne

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# INTRODUCTION

Recently, after a presentation I'd given to a college audience on the subject of interviewing, a student asked me what I thought would be the best way to secure a great job after graduation – not a position that paid the bills, but the kind of opportunity that every student dreams about. My answer was simple: to treat it like they would a marathon.

On the surface, that statement might not seem to make a lot of sense. After all, other than the need to put on a different pair of shoes, finding a new job isn't a lot like an endurance run. My point, though, was that the two are similar in a very important way – that showing up to either unprepared is likely to be frustrating and painful. Just as you wouldn't wake up one morning and decide to run twenty six miles on a whim, neither should you attempt to get a great position at a leading company without having laid the groundwork first.

To even finish a marathon, much less be competitive, you have to start many months or years ahead of time.

It's the same way with your job search. You're not going to come out ahead if you simply show up and start running. Luckily, making yourself into the strongest candidate – the kind that recruiters will actually seek out – isn't that difficult if you've got a bit of time on your side. And even if you'll be graduating and entering the workforce soon, there are still plenty of things you can do to get yourself ready.

In this short e-book I'm going to teach you the tools and tricks you'll need to stand out amongst the thousands of other job seekers that are competing against you. Follow them from now until your graduation day, and I can promise you will be well on the road to getting hired first.

## WHO ARE **YOU?**

There are a lot of different ways to answer this question. For example, you could tell me your name, or if you wanted to be a little more philosophical about it, where you're from or what kind of person you are. But in the context of this e-book, I want you to think about who you are in a very different and distinct light; that is, I want you to consider what you are to other people. What comes to mind when they think of you?

Believe it or not, the answer can have enormous implications when you graduate and start looking for a job. That's because that impression – the one that people have of you, which will be passed on again and again – is your personal brand. It's what you mean, at least in a professional sense. And just like a corporate brand, built up over years or decades, the effort you put into it will determine your value in the marketplace.

Think about that carefully for a moment. Companies around the world spend billions of dollars to build their brands in the eyes of consumers. Eventually, if they're

successful, branding works to the point that certain products literally seem to jump off the shelf. People are so emotionally connected to them that they barely even notice the competition.

In the next few pages, I'm going to teach you enough about the principles of personal branding to make that power work for you. Everything you read is going to be simple, if not always easy. What's more, I can promise you that it will be effective. How can I make that claim? From my own personal experience.

When I was still a young man just finishing my degree, a recruiter called one of my professors looking for a recommendation to fill an entry-level marketing position. Without hesitation, this professor offered my name. I wasn't the smartest student, or the one who always had the right answers. But I was always involved, joining organizations and speaking up in class. Because of that, mine was the first name that came to his mind, and I got a great job with one of America's top companies. That's the power of personal branding, and it can work for you just as it worked for me.

## YOUR BRAND **BASICS**

As I mentioned, I'm going to walk you through the basics of personal branding so that you can use them to your advantage during your college years. If you can follow the steps outlined in these pages, by the time you graduate, potential employers will know everything they need to make the easy decision to pluck you off the shelf and hire you.

When it comes to branding, there are six major components that let buyers (in this case employers) form an impression of you:

Product

Placement

Price

Packaging

Positioning

Promotion

Together, they make up the "six P's" of branding. The first three – product, placement, and price – are the ones you have the least amount of control over. The product, quite simply, is you. Of course, there are things you can do to improve the product, like earn your degree and so



on, but at the end of the day you're still working with your own talents and aptitudes.

Placement, in terms of your age, background, geographic location, and so on, is also largely fixed for now. And the same goes for price. You may reach a point in your career where you have a great deal of control over your salary, but most new graduates are locked into a very tight range of what they can earn.

While you might not be able to change these three factors as much as you'd like, the good news is that the other three are entirely up to you. Let's look at how you can use them to create a buying impulse in employment recruiters.

## EVERYTHING LOOKS BETTER IN **GIFT WRAP**

In the business world, packaging is pretty straightforward. Savvy marketers know that they have to do something exciting if they're going to catch the eye of a prospective buyer. Sometimes, this means using colorful displays; other times, an unusual shape or a picture of an attractive person will do the trick.

When it comes to your own personal branding, packaging is just as important. If you're going to be noticed and bought by recruiters, you're going to have to look like a person they want to hire. This is one reason why it's important for graduates to own at least one good suit and have a little bit of sense when it comes to fashion and personal grooming. You don't need to be in the fanciest clothes, but you do need to look like a professional if you're going to inspire confidence in a prospective employer, not to mention in yourself.

Don't think it's all about your physical appearance, though. Just as large companies will pay millions of dollars just to alter their logos, everything about you – from

your resume to the voicemail message on your phone, to the e-mail address of origin for all your correspondence – should convey the idea that you're ready for the working world. For that reason, you should double-check all of your accounts, or even open new ones if necessary. You don't want a humorous message that you left for your college buddies to be heard by someone who's calling you for an interview at a top firm.

When it comes down to it, your personal packaging precedes you any time a recruiter first comes in contact with you. Because they might not know enough about you to form a deeper opinion, your clothes, grooming habits, and other details form their impression, so make them count.

## POSITIONING YOURSELF AS THE **LEADER**

Brand positioning is a big deal because it determines which products a buyer will prefer over all others. Marketers and ad agencies go to extreme lengths to try to convince the public that their offerings are far superior to the competition. You can create the same effect by simply standing out with your achievements.

Think of it this way: a large number of students don't do much to develop themselves beyond showing up to class and taking all of the required tests. These people are like generic products on the shelf. Their resumes or degrees give you an indication of what's inside, but nothing attests to their innate quality. But suppose you, on the other hand, take an active interest in your field. You join on-campus professional associations, write occasional newsletter articles, and get involved at meetings and events.

By taking these actions, you've done wonders for your personal brand. You've shown that you are interested and engaged in what you're learning about – that you

have innate qualities that some of your classmates might not. These activities and efforts not only improve your standing with recruiters, they help you to create a reputation with your peers, professors, and other men and women affiliated with your program.

Some students recognize this idea and go a bit overboard. These people, joiners, are members of every club and show up at every function. There's nothing wrong with having multiple interests, but prospective employers are going to know if you're just trying to go through the motions. I'd rather meet a young candidate who has put in some hours with two or three groups working on something substantial, than someone who merely signed up for everything. Most other recruiters I know would agree with me on this.

Positioning yourself as the best new hire isn't hard to do. All it takes is a little bit of time and a willingness to get involved.

## PROMOTE THE BRAND CALLED **YOU**

In a lot of industries, promotion is as much an art as it is a science. Still, all of the surveys, product launches, and market research are aimed at accomplishing something that's actually very easy for the average college student: to get enough people talking about a new product.

If you've taken my advice so far, you should be involved in at least a couple of programs. As you meet new people from these activities – especially professors, alumni, and contacts within the working world – make a point of taking their cards or writing down their phone numbers. Then, get into the habit of keeping in touch with these folks every few months or so. Better yet, see if you can occasionally meet up for a cup of coffee.

By growing and maintaining a list of people in your industry, you're doing three great things to help your personal brand. First, you're gaining a lot of knowledge about what's going on with different companies. Second, you're getting comfortable being around professional people, which will give you an immense leg up during the

interview process. But most importantly, you're building a network of contacts who know that you'll be graduating and looking for work in the future. When the time comes to start floating your resume, these folks can point you in the right direction – and towards the thousands of other professionals they know.

Promotion, the final and most important piece of the branding puzzle, is no more complicated than getting the word out. Take the time to build a strong network of professional acquaintances, and let them see what a great candidate you'd make for their companies. Do that, and you may find that your job search becomes a very short affair.

# BE **UNIQUE**

One important, but often overlooked, aspect of personal branding is uniqueness. People never buy a product because it looks like every other product, just as no employer wants a new hire that looks like every other candidate on the shelf. Remember, the reason people respond to brands so strongly is that they make an emotional connection. They want something special, something that stands out above all the others.

That's why so much of the traditional resume, job search, and interview advice that can be found out there is so dangerous. It's not that the people try to pass along bad ideas; it's just that most things stop working when everyone's trying to do them. Recruiters can't distinguish you from others – they can't identify with your brand – if you look and sound like everyone else.

For an example of what I mean, take a look at the objectives you see on most resumes, or recall the most common answers to tough interview questions. Each of them is articulate and well thought-out, but none of them



is effective. They've been done to death so many times that they end up sounding like white noise.

Tom LeForce, an author from my part of the country, once wrote that he was "continually amazed at how many people can do little more than recite generic statements, when I just wish they would impress me." Nowhere is that more true than in the interview process. I'm not telling you to act wild or out of control, but don't be afraid to let a little bit of your personality come through. People make the very best brands because they are easy to engage with and care about. So make sure, as you look for a job, that you impress as a person with personality, not a programmed interview machine.

## PUTTING IT ALL **TOGETHER**

By now, you know enough about personal branding to make a real impact on your job search. But before you go off to climb that first step in your new career, let me give you one last piece of advice: don't neglect any of these steps.

For personal branding to be effective, all of the pieces need to be working together. Otherwise, you're just creating inconsistencies that will raise more questions than answers. For instance, if your packaging is great – you look like a million dollars, and everything from your resume to your footwear makes you seem like a professional – but your positioning isn't as strong, you're going to have a hard time convincing anyone that you're superior to your classmates. Conversely, if you've been involved in a number of activities, but show up to an interview looking like you just finished changing the oil on a dozen cars or even like you slept in your suit, then you're not going to be taken seriously.

For that reason, you should be trying to start this process as early as possible. A freshman or sophomore who understands these principles will be nearly unstoppable by the time graduation nears. In fact, they may find that they don't have to search for a job at all – recruiters will seek them out because of their high profile and the advice of others. On the other hand, someone who goes along for years without paying attention to any of these factors will have to work a lot harder to get noticed.

Your brand is the reputation or impression that precedes you. It shows up to see potential employers before they ever set eyes on you, and remains long after they've met you. Follow the tips in this e-book and start building your personal brand now – I promise you'll thank me later.

## **BONUS TIP:**

### **BUILDING A BRAGGABLE BINDER**

There's a secret piece of advice that I've been giving to friends and relatives for years, and I've decided it's time to start sharing it with the students I present to. It's a simple trick, but one that can put you miles ahead of the other job seekers you come across. I've heard similar ideas go by a lot of names, but I call it building a braggable binder.

It's something you can do any time, but I recommend trying it especially before you start going on interviews. It won't take you more than a few hours, and the effort will pay you back several times over. Here's what you do: gather everything you can that shows something good about you, or draws attention to something good that you've done, whether it's personal, academic, or professional. You might start with certificates, awards, thank you notes, letters of recommendations, pictures of trophies and medals you've won, ribbons for community service, and so on.

From there, put the items into a binder that you'll take with you to interviews. If you feel like it's a bit forward to whip out a book with all of your successes inside, don't worry – you're going to employ the oldest sales trick in the book. Simply bring the binder with you and place it on the floor or desk near where you're sitting. If the interviewer asks about it, simply mention that you brought it along "in case they needed to see your letters of recommendation." You've now motivated them – through curiosity if nothing else – to ask to see your portfolio of success. It's likely your binder is something they probably haven't seen from a candidate in any other interview they've had.

Even if you don't get that far, however, it's still worth your time. That's because the real value of the braggable binder is in putting it together. Going through the exercise forces you to remember all the wonderful accolades you have earned, including some that you might have slipped your mind. Branding is all about separating yourself from the competition by putting your best foot forward. Why not take the time to assemble the proof for you and the rest of the world to see?

## ABOUT THE **AUTHOR**

Joe Mayne is a professional speaker and author from Minneapolis, Minnesota. For more than 15 years, he's been teaching college students from hundreds of campuses across North America how to stand out in the job search process.

From the beginning of his career, when he was hired by a Fortune 500 firm before he graduated college, Joe has been intrigued by the dynamics of the job hunting process. Later, in his work as a recruiter, manager, and consultant, he conducted thousands of interviews and learned how to evaluate candidates from an employer's perspective. He continues to gather and share those insights today through his books, articles, and keynote speeches.



Joe's articles and e-books have been featured nationally online and in the print media, and he continues to give dozens of presentations to colleges and universities each year.

You can find out more about him and his work at [www.MayneSpeaker.com](http://www.MayneSpeaker.com)