
Your personal brand: it's not just you

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Abstract

Brand identity is relevant not just for companies, but also for individuals. Some advocate complex strategies for personal brand creation, but we assert that social network interactions in Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter implicitly define a personal brand. We posit that the chain of people and entities with whom the individual interacts both explicitly and implicitly as well as the topics of those interactions is core to three facets of personal brands: actual, targeted, and perceived. Analysis and refinement of personal information generated in network relations can quickly create a personal brand. This paper presents an experiment to explore our position.

Keywords

Social media, branding, personal informatics, self-analysis

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous..

General Terms

Human Factors

Introduction

Personal branding—the discovery, understanding and marketing of an individual's unique attributes—is a concept brought to the mainstream by Tom Peters in

1997 with his seminal article "The Brand Called You" [1]. Since that time, numerous books, articles and websites have emerged to help individuals develop a "brand plan." To determine a unique brand, most literature suggests a self-assessment based on a short list of open ended questions such as "Who am I?", "How have I gotten here?", "Where do I want to go?", "Who is my target audience?". In addition to a self-awareness assessment, the typical brand plan also includes an action plan to build a presence on social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.

One difficulty with brand plans is that broad self-reflective questions are difficult to answer accurately and effectively. An individual's self-perception is often ill-aligned with how one is perceived by others. Another difficulty is that broad questions can result in broad answers lacking in actionable characteristics. Also, the desire to have quality answers before taking action can stagnate a plan before it can gain momentum.

In this paper, we take a different approach to developing and enhancing a personal brand. Rather than suggest that individuals explicitly answer the open-ended questions and delay social media interactions, we assert that assessing and analyzing existing social media interactions allows the implicit development of a brand. In this way, regular life-style communication behaviors can generate data. An individual's actions will naturally address the questions and analytics will afford an understanding of the implicit answers. From that position, reflection on these answers allows the formulation of informed, incremental actions to define and refine a personal brand. In this paper, we discuss our first, small-scaled experiment in support of this implicit approach.

Hypothesis

Ample literature links self-identify to consumer behavior and retail brand identification [2,3,4]. Additionally, we know that brand communities form around identification with products [5].

We hypothesize that just as individuals identify with a consumer product or brand to support self-definition, they naturally seek out individuals in social contexts who they perceive as supportive of their self-concept. Specifically, individuals can better understand their personal brand by examining existing choices in social media engagements. However, as we stated above, self-perception is often ill-aligned with perception by others. Therefore, equally important to examine is who chooses to engage with the individual.

To explore this hypothesis, we consider three facets of a personal brand: actual, targeted and perceived. The actual brand is reality of self. Validated by mutual, symmetric relations, the individual currently embodies this brand. Mutual relations define the real brand market. The targeted brand is self-perception. Defined asymmetrically by outward seeking, non-reciprocated connections, the individual is influenced by others' actual brands and strives to emulate them. The collection of influencers defines the individual's potential market. The perceived brand is lack of self-association. People who seek the individual without reciprocation attach their brand asymmetrically. Influenced by their own brand relationships, these seekers demonstrate an interest in future engagement.

Experimental setup

To understand how an implicitly created personal brand manifests, we conducted a small-scale experiment

using Twitter status updates (tweets) by account holders and their social network of followers/following relationships. Using the public Twitter API, we collected complete data on several seed accounts (subjects) and all the accounts that were either followers of or followed by those accounts. For additional contextual information about each account we worked with PeerIndex[6], a service that monitors millions of Twitter accounts to build account profiles, analyzes key conversation topics for each account and provides a realness metric on the human to bot scale.

We initially focused on three known accounts with 150-350 followers and following 200-500 other accounts. In total, we gathered data from Twitter and PeerIndex for 1071 Twitter accounts that we believe to be managed and controlled by humans. 813 accounts were either likely robots or lacked activity over the last four months and therefore we excluded them from our study.

We created a social network from the follower/following relationship and calculated the eigenvector centrality of each account to understand prominence. We then scored each account in the network based on the number of shared PeerIndex conversation topics with each subject. We further analyzed accounts for three types of relationships-- friends, followings and fans—to represent the three facets of a personal brand from the above section. Friends are symmetric relations of mutual follows—the actual brand. Followings are asymmetric relations where the subject is not reciprocated with a follow back—targeted brand. Fans indicate an asymmetric relation where the subject does not reciprocate a follow—perceived brand.

Results

We visualized the networks associated with each subject as in figures 1, 2, and 3. We base node shape on whether the relation to the subject is a friend (hexagon), a following (diamond), or fan (triangle). We base color on a gradient from red to blue according to the number of PeerIndex topics in common with the subject, a red circle, in the center. We scale node size by PeerIndex's overall score of Twitter prominence.

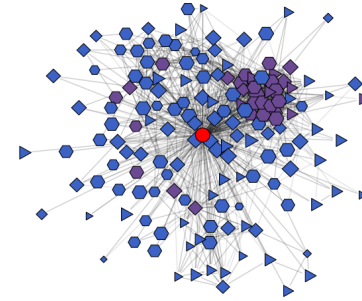


figure 1. Subject A's network of friends(hexagons), following(diamonds), and fans(triangles).

Immediately we see three very different stories. Subject A in figure 1 shows a tight cluster of individuals which all have a single topic in common with the subject. This tight cluster made up of many friends, can be interpreted as the core topic of Subject A's brand. Mutual relationships abound and information about the particular shared topic can quickly spread through multiplexed channels. Several accounts—from each of the friend, following, and fans types—are outside the tight cluster and have topics in common. Subject B in figure 2 shows a much denser network overall and with many accounts having multiple terms in common with the subject. In contrast, there is no clear cluster of individuals, but due to the overall density of the

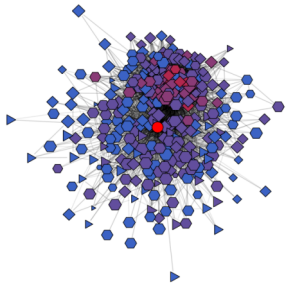


figure 2. Subject B demonstrates a dense well established network with a common brand identity.

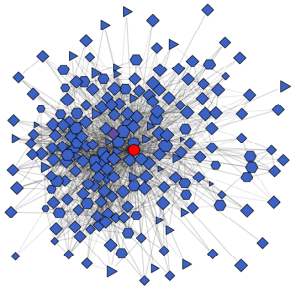


figure 3. Subject C lacks any significant common topics with account in his network and shows few areas with sufficient clustering to attempt to build a brand.

network and the number of individuals with shared topics, information can easily propagate. Finally, Subject C in figure 3 lacks any evidence of a consolidated brand. Only a single account shares topics with the subject without any apparent clustering.

In short, we see that Subject A has a core focus and small brand definition, but often reaches out to a variety of other accounts. This means that there are ample opportunities to grow this brand with individuals already in Subject A's network. Subject B already has a tight and consolidated network that shares many of the same topics. B has a solid well-established brand, but has few ties outside of the core personal brand. This could indicate that B might have difficulty expanding beyond the current niche. Subject C is a dilettante who lacks any concept of a target brand. An analysis of Subject C reveals tweets on a wide variety of non-related topics and little pattern to individuals followed beyond a geographic affinity.

For Subject A and B we found that friends had more topics in common with the subject than accounts that were followed by the subject, which in turn had more topics in common than fans of the subject, consistent with our preliminary hypotheses. This finding has implications for personal brand development as it indicates where to place focus on maintaining and strengthening brand topics.

Conclusions and Next Steps

We can use the visualization to understand which individuals may play key roles in either solidifying or expanding a brand. In both cases, we focus on the fans that share topics with the subject. We order fans that have topics in common with the subject by the number

of shared topics and their eigenvector centrality. Selecting a fan with many common topics and high eigenvector centrality provides an opportunity to engage directly with an individual who is otherwise on the cusp of network involvement. Engaging such fans will help to solidify the brand in an existing cluster of individuals. In contrast, engaging an individual with common topics, but a lower eigenvector centrality may help expand the brand by contacting interested individuals who may not receive information directly from accounts already in the brand network. The choice of which accounts to engage depends on the desired strategy: consolidate strength where the implicit brand currently thrives or expand for future growth.

Next, we would like to improve the visualization by exposing shared topics and adding interactivity to facilitate exploration of friends, followings and fans.

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