

Brand You: Authentic Presence in a Noisy World

Overview

This session focused on personal branding and authentic presence in professional settings, particularly on LinkedIn. The workshop, titled "Brand You: Authentic Presence in a Noisy World," was presented by Annesha Dutta as part of District 41's Special Leadership Program. The session explored how Toastmasters can develop their personal brand, create authentic content, and establish a professional presence online that reflects their true values and expertise.

Key Concepts or Theories:

- Personal branding as an authentic expression of one's skills, values, and experiences
- The "Iron Pillar Principle" - creating content that stands the test of time rather than chasing trends
- The "Black Jacket Look" - developing a signature personal brand that is instantly recognizable
- Three-part framework for personal brand development: choosing a North Star, sharing authentic stories, and creating multi-platform content

Important Questions Raised:

- How can professionals build an authentic personal brand that stands out in a noisy digital world?
- What strategies can Toastmasters use to translate their speaking and leadership skills to online platforms?
- How can professionals in restrictive industries (like banking) still develop a personal brand without compromising confidentiality?
- How can someone returning to the workforce after a break effectively position their personal brand?

Key Takeaways and Summary of Learning Objectives

- Personal branding is about perception - how others see you professionally and the impression you make at first touchpoints
- Authentic personal branding requires identifying your unique skills, stories, and communication style
- LinkedIn offers significant reach for professionals with over 70 million companies and India being the second-largest user base globally
- Consistency in posting quality content is more important than quantity or perfection
- Your personal brand should be built on real experiences that AI cannot replicate

Topic 1: Understanding Personal Brand Perception

Personal branding begins with understanding how others perceive you, which often differs from self-perception. The workshop demonstrated this through a quick exercise where participants shared immediate impressions of well-known figures like Jensen Wang (CEO of Nvidia), Donald Trump, Indra Nooyi, and Taylor Swift. This exercise highlighted how quickly perceptions form and how these perceptions become the foundation of one's professional brand. A personal or executive brand is essentially the way people perceive you at the workplace - your first touchpoint with managers, team members, customers, and peers. Building a strong personal brand requires understanding your current perception, identifying your unique strengths, and deliberately shaping how you want to be perceived. Annesha recommended conducting a simple exercise where you ask trusted colleagues to write down five adjectives that describe you, which often reveals surprising insights about how others see you compared to your self-perception.

Relevant Q&A

Deepti: How can someone who's been out of the workforce for many years and is now trying to return build a personal brand when they don't have high-visibility achievements?

Annesha: Career breaks and sabbatical stories are getting a lot of honest engagement. Start by sharing your story - perhaps with a picture from your last day at work - and discuss what skills you developed during your time away and how they prepare you to add value now. Don't let imposter syndrome hold you back; just start posting and you'll see engagement.

Topic 2: Creating Your Personal Brand Statement

The workshop provided a framework for developing a personal brand statement based on three key elements: your story (personal background and journey), your mission (the impact you want to make), and your style (preferred way of expression). Participants were guided through a one-minute exercise to draft their personal brand statements. The presenter shared her own example:

coming from a lower-middle-class family in Jamshedpur, studying English in Calcutta, and how her love of storytelling led her through teaching, Teach for India, Toastmasters, and corporate communications. Her mission focuses on helping women speak up more confidently, drawing from her own experience as an introvert who found her voice through Toastmasters. For style, she prefers writing, though she also creates videos. To refine this initial brand statement, Annesha recommended examining personal patterns (strengths and weaknesses), identifying how you can uniquely help others, and focusing on giving value rather than taking. This approach shifts personal branding from self-promotion to service.

Relevant Q&A

Vinita: I'm struggling to find my niche. I love writing, poetry, storytelling, minimalism, communication, Toastmasters, empathy in relationships, and parenting. Should I have separate pages or can one page work?

Annesha: Use LinkedIn to test your material before creating separate pages. Run polls to see what your followers want to hear about, try combining topics (like minimalism and productivity at work), and experiment with different content formats. Look at engagement analytics to see what resonates, and let your community guide your niche development.

Topic 3: Building Your Brand on LinkedIn

The session provided practical guidance for establishing a professional presence on LinkedIn, which has become a powerful platform for personal branding since the pandemic. With India being the second-largest user base globally, LinkedIn offers significant reach for professionals. The presenter outlined three key components of LinkedIn branding: profile optimization, thought leadership, and community engagement. For profile optimization, Annesha recommended a professional profile picture (neutral background, formal attire, visible eyes, slight smile), a relevant cover image, a detailed headline beyond just job title, and an SEO-optimized bio. Additional elements include complete job descriptions, education details, skills, interests, media links, testimonials, and endorsements. For content creation, she suggested sharing personal stories, learnings, observations, opinions, reviews, behind-the-scenes glimpses, industry knowledge, career advice, and niche community knowledge. The presenter emphasized authenticity, recommending that professionals create content based on their unique experiences rather than AI-generated material, following what she called the "Iron Pillar Principle" - creating content that stands the test of time.

Relevant Q&A

Aditya: Due to my profession as a banker, I don't write much about work due to privacy reasons. Any ideas to brand myself?

Annesha: Write about how Toastmasters has helped your professional growth without naming specifics - like improved confidence in client meetings or better virtual communication skills. As club president, share about servant leadership principles or day-in-the-life experiences. You could also discuss shows like "Succession" or "Industry" from a culture perspective without revealing details about your own workplace.

Actionable Next Steps / Assignments

- Create at least three takeaways from the session and post about them on LinkedIn within the week, tagging District 41 and Annesha Dutta
- Complete the assignment shared via Google Drive link: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AJAxeT-uxmcoSReo2fUWa1GtC5I9Pzf/view>
- Fill out the feedback form shared in the chat: <https://forms.gle/9q3BTWKnxeQgfLAC9>
- Develop your personal brand statement using the three-part framework: your story, your mission, and your style
- Optimize your LinkedIn profile following the guidelines shared in the session

Supplemental Resources and Readings

- Recommended LinkedIn profiles to study: Radhika Gupta (CEO of Edelweiss) and Ranjani Mani (AI leader at Microsoft)
- Recommended Toastmasters pathways for personal branding: Presentation Mastery, Visionary Communication, and Persuasive Influence
- Recommended books: "Presence" and "Start With Why"
- Recommended talks: Amy Cuddy's "How Your Body Language Shapes You" and Brené Brown's "The Power of Vulnerability"
- Annesha's newsletter "LUMINARY" on Substack and YouTube channel "Ask Annie" for more personal branding content