



ROCKSTAR

PERSONAL

BRANDING

by Skellie

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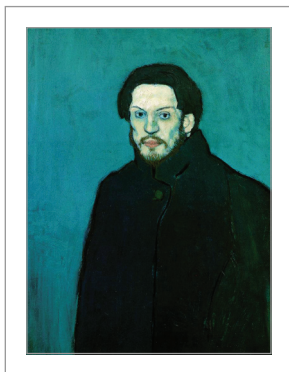
AN INTRODUCTION

Personal Branding: An Introduction

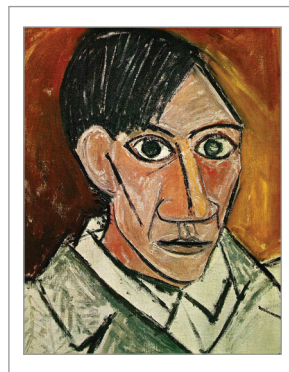
Personal branding isn't very different than product branding, except that the entity being branded is you. Just like Nike uses its brand to attach a certain personality and uniqueness to the shoes it sells, your personal brand is made up of the qualities and unique traits you relay about yourself. Your personal brand represents the way you want other people to think about you.

Personal branding hinges on perception and the stories you tell about yourself: the things you emphasize and the things you don't. Does personal branding involve lying? It shouldn't. More than that, it shouldn't have to. You don't need to be a rockstar to build an extraordinary personal brand.

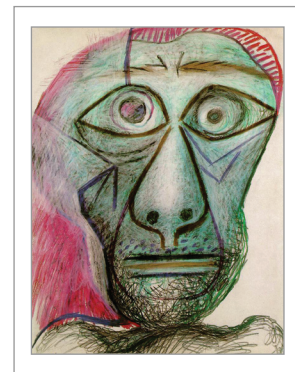
Think of personal branding like an artist's portrait of her or himself. Picasso, for example, created more than 10 self-portraits in his lifetime. Some are so stylized that he's unrecognizable. Others emphasize his nose and de-emphasize his eyes; others make him look more handsome than he really was. They're all different; all representations of the varying ways Picasso saw himself. Though all the images represent the same person, they encourage us to view the man through a different lens each time.



Pablo Picasso
Self-portrait with Cloak *
1901



Pablo Picasso
Self-portrait *
1907



Pablo Picasso
Self-portrait *
1972

Personal branding is kind of like creating a self-portrait and, in doing so, changing the way people think of you.

The next question you probably have is: *Why is this important?*

Why care about your personal brand?

Freelancers? There are thousands of them. Bloggers? Even more. Entrepreneurs? Join the crowd. If you can't get attention, you're just another speck in the crowd. Part of the average and part of the many. None of us want that for our business.

Your personal brand is the ladder you use to escape the average; the device you use to help potential clients, buyers or readers perceive you as the person they've been looking for.

- A well-built personal brand will help you attract attention from the kind of people you want attention from.
- It will make you worth talking about.
- It will set you apart from competitors in your niche.
- It will help you develop some notoriety.
- It could make you famous within your target market.

All of the above translates into plentiful benefits: more clients (or better clients), more attention, more sales, more profits, more visitors, and more opportunities.

What follows is a guide to setting up and maintaining a complete personal brand—from your unique selling proposition right down to the way you design your business cards.



Positioning Yourself

Most big projects start with a plan. Most self-portraits start with a rough sketch. The way you position yourself relative to competitors is the scaffolding beneath your personal brand.

Powerful positioning takes into account the omissions, weaknesses or the boring aspects of those competing with you for attention. If other SEO consultants seem unable to talk SEO without loads of industry jargon, that's an opportunity to position yourself as approachable, relatable and easy to understand. If other bloggers in your niche are pre-occupied with publishing only short, newsy pieces, you could then position yourself as a source of in-depth analysis and commentary. While your positioning doesn't have to be radically different to the rest of your competitors, it's got to be real enough that you offer a genuine alternative.

Your brand positioning is mainly expressed in your output: the work you do, the products you sell, the services you provide, and the content you create. If you gravitate towards doing web design work on innovative or unusual projects, your positioning will start to reflect that. If your behavior, your attitude and your output contradict the way you're trying to position yourself, your real positioning (the way your brand is perceived) will change. If you're aiming for a friendly, helpful image but rarely respond to your clients' emails, for example, your positioning will inevitably end up leagues away from where you'd like it to be.

Jack-of-all-trades—or master of one?

Another question related to positioning to ask yourself is this: Do I position myself as a generalist or a specialist? As a generalist you have more competition, but that's matched by a larger audience for what you offer. As a specialist you have less competition, but that's matched by a significantly smaller target market.

At first glance, it might seem like specialization should always be the answer, particularly if we acknowledge the importance of being unique. Despite that, I don't think you need to be a specialist to be unique and remarkable. The route you choose should depend on an honest assessment of your skills and the kind of goals you're working towards.

Generalists

Don't position yourself as a generalist unless you're a) among the best at what you do; b) have a unique selling proposition, which I discuss below; or c) are multi-talented, or accomplished in a few different fields. Let me explain the reasoning behind each of these propositions.

As a freelance photographer, for example, you'll be lost in a crowd of thousands unless there are a lot of people out there who know just how good you are. On the other hand, a sensational generalist photographer who confines herself to wedding photos only might be limiting the growth of her business.

If you're multi-talented or accomplished in a few different fields (in a way that's worth talking about), positioning yourself as a generalist could be a very good idea. The first point to consider is that you don't need to trade on all of your skills financially. Being a copywriter with a degree in Graphic Design who speaks four languages and works remotely via laptop from Nepal doesn't mean you need to sell anything more than plain old copywriting. Your other skills and accomplishments will help differentiate you from competitors, even if they don't strictly relate to the work you do.

Specialists

Don't position yourself as a specialist unless you're a) among the best at what you specialize in; b) comfortable doing a lot of one thing; and c) sure there's a target audience looking for your particular services.

If you specialize in one area, your target market shrinks. To sustain your business in spite of a small target market, you need to capture a larger share of attention to compensate. To do that, you need to be among the best at what you specialize in — if not the best. You might see the perfect opportunity for a start-up selling hand-painted PC cases to a small cluster of high-paying clients, but if someone else is doing the same thing better (or cheaper), your business won't be sustainable. An eye for profit-making opportunities must be matched by the skill to be a leader in your niche.

The second factor to consider is whether specialization will prove too limiting for you. A blog on collecting baseball bats might tap into an undiscovered and highly profitable niche, but you'd best be sure that you've got ideas for at least 100 articles on baseball bats each year. Without passion and an unstoppable interest, specialization won't work.

Lastly, being a specialist seller of wax fruit, for example, will be useless to you unless there's a previously neglected demand for waxy, fruity products. Tapping into an under-served niche and being the single go-to guy or gal for that market is a dream shared by many freelancers, bloggers and entrepreneurs alike. My advice is to avoid any kind of guess-work. Use the [Google AdWords keyword sandbox](#) to check whether people are actually trying to find the service or product you're thinking of offering—and whether the niche is really as under-served as you thought. Turns out there are more competitors than searchers for the term 'wax fruit'—which is a little disappointing—but it's always best to find out these things before you order a \$10,000 shipment of inedible banana-shaped objects.

Generalist Specialists

It's possible to be a general web designer and a Wordpress expert, for example. If neither the specialist or generalist route captures your imagination, the solution is probably to do a bit of both: portray yourself as a generalist with additional specialized skills and expertise, preferably in an area that's of high value to your target market. This will give you a broader client base while particularly attracting those who could use your specialized services.

It's impossible to make broad claims about which route is the most effective for everyone. Go with the one that best describes how you see yourself and it's likely to be the most effective for you.

Your unique selling proposition

A unique selling proposition (USP) is one clever tool you can use to create a remarkable personal brand.

In marketing speak, a product's unique selling proposition is the different, attractive idea that sets a product apart from its competitors. It defines the product. FedEx's unique selling proposition was its ability to deliver packages overnight, without fail. Domino's Pizza promised a still-hot meal delivered within thirty minutes, or your money back. The lynch-pin of any Rockstar personal brand is your own USP. What do you do (or could you do) that other people in your field don't? What is it about your work, product or service that makes it unique?

Your USP is the take-home point; the one-paragraph point of difference made to stick in the minds of your target market.

If you've already got one in mind, that's fantastic. But I don't expect you to. If you're scratching your head, you're still on the right track.

An effective USP is one that links in with your brand positioning. For FedEx, its overnight delivery promise perfectly complimented its "fast and reliable" brand perception. If the quality you're trying to associate with your brand is "friendly and helpful", it doesn't make sense to base your USP around an uncanny ability to stay within allocated project budgets. Your positioning and USP should carry one consistent message.

If you can't think of one important thing you do differently or better than other people in your field, you can create a USP from scratch—but you must be committed to delivering on your promise. If your USP is "projects delivered on time, every time", you'd better be prepared for the occasional 4 a.m. finish as you struggle to get a project done on time. You can be imperfect at a lot of things and your business won't suffer, but each failure to uphold your USP will damage your credibility.

Let's look at a few hypothetical examples to illustrate how a USP can be used:

- Productivity guru Prath Chineer runs an online business selling his signature paper productivity systems for \$19. His unique selling proposition is a 110% money-back guarantee to any customer unsatisfied with his products or any aspect of his service. Prath's personal USP is extreme dedication to the satisfaction of his customers.
- Pamela Bucheli is a small business web designer. Her USP is that she provides comprehensive answers to questions and enquiries from clients within 12 hours, or she'll take 20 percent off the price of her work.

- Nikki Justice runs a blog about GPS navigation. The rest of her niche is pre-occupied by rushing to break news and publish press releases, but as Nikki works full-time doing PR for a chain of convenience stores, she rarely gets the scoop. She decides to play to her strengths and build a personal brand around her in-depth analysis of advances in GPS technology and her deep knowledge of GPS systems. While other bloggers in her niche are news-breakers, Nikki's personal USP is her deep knowledge of GPS systems and what new technologies mean in context. She's hoping that her PR skills coupled with her unique selling proposition will land her a job doing public relations for a major auto-GPS manufacturer.
- Jon Zuiderweg is a freelance illustrator who specializes in illustrating children's books. His USP is that he has an in-depth understanding of how children interact and interpret visuals at different stages of development, something he learned while gaining a degree in Child Psychology.

The above are just a few examples of the way a USP can be used to set your personal brand apart. Your own USP needs to meet these three criteria: You can deliver on it, it's consistent with your positioning and it's something clients/buyers/readers actually want.

2

Building your Reputation

Be good at what you say you're good at. Then make people think you're even better.

The following two things will add a lot of value to your personal brand: real skill where you need it, and expert status. Here's how to get both those things:

Real Skill Where You Need It

An online store owner looking for a web designer doesn't really want someone who's just good at writing code that validates. Clients invest in a design because they hope it will pay for itself in rewards: more traffic, better branding and more sales. Use common sense and a bit of research to work out what your target market wants, then build your ability to deliver in these areas. Finally, market yourself on the ability to meet those needs.

Becoming an Expert

An expert is someone who knows a lot about a certain subject. In this context, you're an expert if you know more about your field than your target market, though people do tend to compare accomplishments and formal qualifications when ranking experts against each other. If you know a lot about what you do, you're probably already an expert. The next question is whether your target market sees you that way.

If you're selling your skills, advice or an information product, being seen as an expert is invaluable. Here are a few things you can do to boost your expert status:

- Run a blog with in-depth articles on your field.
- Join related trade organizations. If you're selling a product related to health and fitness, for example, you can become a member of the [IDEA Health & Fitness Association](#) for a one-time \$89 fee. There are thousands of trade organizations out there and you should be able to find at least one that suits your personal brand.
- Bank on your experience. If you've been involved in your field for 5+ years or worked for over 500 clients, let people know about it.
- Get published on your topic. Write an article or do an interview for a trade magazine, local newspaper or popular website in your niche.
- Get formal qualifications. You can complete certificates and short-courses in most areas in a few weeks—just make sure you pick one that sounds impressive and relates to your career.

- Teach classes or hold free talks. Contact your local university and offer to hold a free lunch-time seminar on your core area of expertise. Alternately, offer to run free classes. Even if you aren't offered a spot without pay, you can usually hire un-booked lecture theatres by the hour. If you hold a talk, you can then list: "Lectured on <topic> at the <university name>" under your qualifications. It's true, and it sounds great. If you decide to run free classes instead, you can list, "Held lessons on <topic> at <college name> during 2008." Once again, true, and it sounds fantastic.

The final touch is in how you communicate your expert status to clients. I'd suggest mentioning these things in your bio, or if they're more formal, under your qualifications. You can also use your expert experiences as fodder for blog posts or articles.

3

Crafting your Elevator Pitch

Your elevator pitch is your personal landing page: it describes who you are, what you do and how you can help. It can be either verbal or written and, ideally, it should communicate a lot of information in not too many words. It's a loose script you can use when you meet someone with the potential to help your business: a prospect, a buyer, someone you could collaborate with, or someone who might link to your blog or website. There are a few key points to remember when developing your elevator pitch:

- It shouldn't sound like you're reading from a script. It's probably a good idea to focus your verbal elevator pitch around a few central points instead of memorizing a short monologue. Unless you're a sensational actor, it's guaranteed to be painfully obvious that you're repeating a script. An imperfect elevator pitch is preferable to making you prospect feel awkward and you sound like a robot!
- It shouldn't sound like a sales pitch. An effective elevator pitch won't seem like a pitch at all. Describe what you do and who it benefits. Work in your USP if possible, but make sure you don't adopt the language of advertising. You're a human being, not a product.
- It should be tailored to your audience. The contents of your elevator pitch should be flexible. If you're a freelance photographer talking to someone who's getting married in a few weeks and needs a wedding photographer, work in some specific information about how you approach wedding photography. Tailor your message depending on what your audience most wants to hear. A good general rule is this: Use specific messages for small audiences (an elevator pitch you deliver to someone you meet at a conference) and broader messages for large audiences (the elevator pitch on the front page of your website).
- It should be short and to the point. A verbal elevator pitch shouldn't be longer than thirty seconds or you'll start to bore the person you're talking to. Besides, if you can't express what you do, what makes it special and how you can help in just a few sentences, you're not being clear enough. When you start to preambule every statement you make with long explanations, that betrays a lack of confidence. Making clear, concise statements is a sign of confidence in the value of what you do: something that will help make your elevator pitch all the more powerful.

To get you started, here's an example elevator pitch. It's not perfect, but it does answer the four questions an effective elevator pitch must answer:

- Who are you?
- What do you do?
- What makes you unique?
- Why should I care?

“I’m Skellie and I work as a freelance blogger. I’ve been lucky enough to write for a few big blogs, like ProBlogger and Freelance Switch, probably because I’ve become pretty good at writing posts that attract high numbers of comments and social media votes, particularly from StumbleUpon. My core aim when writing a post is to make it incredibly useful for the blog’s target audience. I think bloggers also like me because I’m relatively foolproof when it comes to meeting deadlines and responding to emails quickly. I also make a point of interacting with commenters on each post I write.”

How it Works

The first sentence ticks a box next to questions one and two. I don’t waste too much time explaining who I am and what I do, because people are mainly interested to hear what you can do for them.

In describing that my posts receive high numbers of comments and social media votes, I’m explaining why the listener should care. Most blog owners really like that stuff, after all.

By pitching myself as a StumbleUpon specialist (my USP), someone who meets deadlines, responds to emails quickly and interacts with commenters on each post I write, I’ve added a few unique details to help me stand out in the mind of a prospective client.

4

Leveraging Blogging for Branding

If you're trying to build a strong personal brand in the Web 2.0 age, there's no excuse not to blog—even if you don't intend to put very much effort into it.

Updating a blog where your name is mentioned and doing it often should allow you to rank #1 in searches for your name, even if you only update with one small post once a month. Anyone searching for your name will immediately stumble across all the information you'd want them to find—as opposed to all the information you wouldn't. If you already have hosting space the whole process shouldn't cost you more than \$15US a year—a small price to pay for something that helps secure your personal brand.

The above represents the minimum reward blogging can yield, but I think it can do a whole lot more. The more you put in, the more you get out. A blog can boost your personal brand in a number of ways:

- If you blog on your field it can help establish you as an expert/authority.
- Blog readers can go on to become clients and customers.
- You can leverage a loyal audience to support your non-blogging projects, services or products.
- A blog gives you an element of notoriety, which will help you charge premium prices.
- A blog allows you to network with other influential bloggers. You might be able to do favors for them in return for promotion of your business or blog.
- Popular bloggers often get interviewed, which provides an opportunity to promote your personal brand to a new audience.
- Successful blogs can lead to book deals and other lucrative opportunities.
- A blog can function as a portfolio. If you're a freelance blogger, you will need to run your own thriving blog to be successful. If you're a web designer, a well-designed blog will help sell you. You can use your blog posts to demonstrate skills and expertise in your field.

Personal Branding for Bloggers

Your blog's About page, your guest posts and your comments are all personal branding opportunities. Here's how to optimize each of these things:

About Page

Treat your blog's About page like a rockstar bio, but first, explain what your blog has to offer before you explain what you have to offer. You should follow the rules for writing a rockstar bio provided later on in the eBook.

Guest-posting

Quality guest-posters are welcomed by most popular bloggers because your content gives them a chance to take some time off! Writing a quality post with a lot of value for the blog's target audience will lead to more traffic filtering back to your blog. You can even create a special landing page for visitors from the other blog, designed to convert them into readers, or customers, or clients.

Comments

Writing comments on other blogs can help plant the seeds of a relationship with the blog's owner and introduce yourself to her/his readers. Use the name you want your personal brand to exist under. Comments that are friendly and informative tend to be well-received. Just make sure not to become known as a nit-picker: the person who will always point out a missing point or make minor corrections. There are many other ways to show your expertise in a positive rather than negative way.

What to Blog About?

From a personal branding perspective, it's most powerful to blog on topics that relate to your field or are important to your target market. It's quite difficult to reach a wide audience with a personal blog because there's so much competition. It's also hard to be an authentic personal blogger without saying anything that contravenes the personal brand you're trying hard to build. If you want to go personal, I'd suggest mixing it in with topical stuff.

5

Perfecting the Package

Packaging helps to shape positioning. The material and visual elements of your personal brand will knock your positioning out of alignment if they don't match up. Packaging that does support your positioning will make your personal brand even stronger and more memorable.

Unless you're an entrepreneur selling products that come in boxes, you're probably going to have to change the way you think about packaging. In the context of personal branding, your packaging refers to the material and visual elements people associate with you: business cards, photos, email signatures, logos, the way you dress, the way your website is designed, and so on.

- **Business cards.** Designers, photographers and illustrators should pay special heed to the humble business card. You're being judged, at least partially, on your sense of the aesthetic and your business card is an opportunity to show that you know how to make something look good. Over at [Freelance Switch](#) we have [18 Smokin' Hot Business Card Designs](#) you can look to for an idea of what's possible with a bit of time, money and effort.

There's one rule to follow when deciding what to put on your business card: keep it simple. Your name, a tagline, what you do and some contact details are all you need. Your tagline should be the one thing you want prospective clients to remember about you—because they'll probably only remember one thing!

- **Photos.** Unless you develop a personal logo, the visuals you use to represent your personal brand will perform the same function as a logo. The kind of image you choose will depend on your positioning. If you plan on conducting some part of your business or networking offline, it's important to have a publicly available photo so you can be recognized. It's also helpful if you need to build trust.

If you're positioning yourself as fun, friendly and vibrant, use a photo that shows you smiling or laughing, preferably in casual clothes. If you're positioning yourself as an authority, an expert or a professional, dress smartly and try to look thoughtful or dignified. And if you're positioning yourself as cool, hip and edgy, try to dress stylishly and consider doing something interesting with your photo. You might make it black and white or take it in an interesting setting.

With the above in mind, you can create a combo to suit your unique positioning. If you're a friendly expert, you could be pictured laughing or smiling in a suit. If you're not too keen on your body being featured in a photo, use a headshot. The two facial expressions to avoid are stunned and mean. Should you intend for a lot of people to see your photo, hiring a good photographer for your portrait will make anyone look better.

- **Website / Blog Design.** A poor design isn't all bad for its own sake. It's damaging primarily because it says that you've been unwilling to invest in a professional web presence. If you're unwilling to make your own website as good as it could be, prospects might take that as an indicator of your work ethic. If you're a blogger, a bad design can drastically change the way a first-time visitor perceives your blog. When the decision to stay or navigate away is made in a few seconds, perception is everything.

Writing a rockstar bio

In the context of a website or blog, your About page should contain a great bio. It's the place visitors and prospects will head to when they want answers to a few questions they might have, like:

- Who is this person?
- What do they do?
- Do they have anything to offer me?
- What's remarkable about them?

As a general rule, a good bio will answer those questions in descending order. People usually won't stick with your life story, starting from birth, unless they have a reason to believe it's going to end up somewhere interesting!

Your first paragraph is an exception to the rule. You can expect a lot of people who visit your bio page to read your first paragraph, then stop. When writing your intro, use this question as a guiding principle:

*What would I most want people to know about me,
expressed in one paragraph?*

If that question leaves you stumped, think of your intro like this: one paragraph to make you sound as cool and interesting and possible, while telling people who you are and what you do. What are your most remarkable accomplishments? What do you want prospects to know you for?

If you're still stumped, here's a guaranteed solution: use an adapted version of your elevator pitch as your intro. The rest of your bio should be dedicated to the two core questions a reader is likely to have: *does this person have anything to offer me? What makes them remarkable / unique?*

You can mine some details to include by answering the following questions:

- How long have I been doing this stuff?
- Do I have any formal qualifications?
- What are my most interesting and impressive accomplishments?
- Have important people or media ever talked about me?
- What are my most interesting and impressive talents?
- Have I worked for any high profile clients?
- Have I written for any magazines/newspapers/blogs?
- What is my USP?
- Why am I doing what I do?
- What makes me different to other people who might appear similar?
- What is important to me?

The central skill involved in writing a good bio is knowing what to include and what to leave out. If any of the answers to the above questions don't excite you, don't include those answers. Talk about the things you're proud of—things you'd want other people to know. This doesn't mean you should gloss over all the adversity in your life and your career. You can be proud of the way you've triumphed over difficulties and of the way you've learned from mistakes.

Be someone worth talking about

*“People talking about you is far more effective
than talking about yourself.”*

—Seth Godin

When we talk about ourselves, we're biased. People are suspicious of bias. We're far more inclined to buy a product recommended by a friend than a product recommended by its maker. The best kind of self-promotion is not talking about yourself; it's doing and creating things that other people want to talk about.

Here are nine remarkable things you can do to become someone worth talking about:

1. **Give something away for free.** If you're a web designer, create a free Wordpress theme. If you're a blogger, writer or entrepreneur, create an eBook. If you're a photographer, create a small library of stock images people can use for anything—no strings attached. Giving without hoping to receive is a remarkable act and it usually ends up with you getting more than you gave in the first place!
2. **Work from an exotic location.** Freedom of location is an attractive quality. A mobile web-worker freelancing from Ethiopia is more interesting than a blog consultant working from his bedroom.
3. **Become a slash.** As in, the punctuation. A slash is someone who doesn't confine themselves to one label or career. Strange combinations are often talked about. Are you an entrepreneur/priest, a pro blogger/yacht racer, an industrial designer/world traveler, or an illustrator/yoga instructor?
4. **Enter and win competitions (or try to).** Entering is easy, winning can be hard, but nothing is impossible. Try to win awards and prizes in your field. The prize is free promotion, street cred and another cool point of interest to add to your bio.
5. **Give something back.** Surprise your clients by offering to donate 5% of the payment they've just given you to a charity of their choice. If you can't spare the 5%, charge 5% more.
6. **Rags to riches.** If your business has transformed your fortunes, tell the story. Overcoming poverty, failure or a very average beginning can become part of your personal brand.
7. **Become an uber-specialist.** A very narrow field means less competition to be the best. Sometimes a very specific and rare job description is enough to make you worth talking about.
8. **Create a viral blog or website.** Not the easiest option, but perhaps the most effective. Being read by thousands of people every day will open up some incredible promotional opportunities and send you a steady stream of quality clients.
9. **Pay attention to the little things.** Send each of your clients a bottle of wine, or send them a T-shirt with your logo on it, or create a website for five [Kiva](#) entrepreneurs you've sponsored with a percentage of your profits. Make your clients and customers feel like the sponsorships are theirs. Little things like that will make you memorable.

REVIEW POINTS

Review Points

This eBook has hopefully given you the tools to answer the following questions:

- What kind of personal brand do I want?
- What's my unique selling proposition?
- How am I going to position my personal brand?
- Am I a generalist, a specialist, or both?
- Are all my actions consistent with my personal branding?
- Does my packaging compliment my personal brand?
- Is my bio helping to build my personal brand?
- Am I presenting myself as someone worth talking about?

For self-employed people or self-determining bloggers, a strong and consistent personal brand could be what's needed to unlock your true potential as a solo business owner. With the information in this e-Book and a little time, energy and money, you can develop your personal brand and take your business, whatever it may be, to new successes.

About the Author

Skellie is a professional blogger and freelance writer. She has written for a number of popular blogs, including ProBlogger.net and Freelance Switch, and runs two blogs of her own: [Anywired](#) (on working and earning an income online), and [Skelliewag](#) (on blogging).