

SELF-BRANDING

The (Safe for Work) Self

Laura Fitton was a working mom with a floundering home business when she discovered Twitter. As one of the service's earliest adopters, she rocketed to fame in 2007, garnering more than fifty thousand followers at a time when having a thousand was impressive. Known as @pistachio, Fitton used the service to follow Web 2.0 celebrities she had only read about on blogs. "It was such a fast, rapid, effective way to start meeting people," she told me. "I felt like the people I was interacting with on Twitter were co-workers." Fitton quickly found out that "all the American heavyweights" she followed on the service were going to a conference, called LeWeb, in Paris. There, Fitton would cement her reputation as a Twitter consultant.

Guy Kawasaki was an early Apple employee turned Silicon Valley venture capitalist who had become a popular blogger and fixture on the tech scene circuit. Fitton, excited by her newfound Twitter friends, encouraged him to use the service, and he took avidly to the

new platform, becoming one of the most followed people in the tech scene. Kawasaki recommended her for speaking gigs and conferences, and she quickly became a go-to authority on the service, writing the popular book *Twitter for Dummies*. She appeared on the “best-attended panels at prestigious conferences and is surrounded by the most people when the talk ends,” one interviewer wrote. But Fitton was unable to convert this social prestige to actual capital, and she found herself deep in credit card debt and struggling to pay bills. In 2009, Fitton founded a company called OneForty. Originally conceived as an app store for Twitter, it morphed into a social media guide for business. Attracting clients such as Virgin and CitiBank, OneForty raised more than \$2 million in venture capital.

Fitton’s is the ultimate Web 2.0 success story: a driven entrepreneur achieves financial independence solely through her use of social media. Self-branding functions as a culmination of all the dynamics discussed in this book: the production of knowledge as a commodity, the belief that status is something better achieved than ascribed by the group, and the idea that micro-celebrity is something better ascribed than achieved. Fitton’s knowledge consisted of knowing who “mattered” and where they would be gathered. Her status was achieved through her accomplishments: not only enormous numbers of Twitter followers, but also publications, speaking gigs, and her own successfully funded company. And her micro-celebrity was ascribed and legitimized with a public stamp of approval from celebrities like Kawasaki, who boasted significant business experience. Fitton’s persona-brand, Pistachio, was literally a “thing” separate from her everyday understanding of herself.

Fitton’s story is extremely unusual, but Web 2.0 experts and self-branding consultants attest that it is consummately achievable. The key element? Self-branding. The idea of turning yourself into a brand is now presented as an essential Web 2.0 strategy, and is firmly instilled in modern business culture. Self-branding has become popular at a time when brand creation is championed as a solution to all sorts of business problems, such as a lack of competitiveness, a failure to stay up-to-date, and ineffective communication.

As a result, a wide swath of social organizations—including countries, ethnic groups, and the military—have adopted branding techniques.¹ The personal brand extends to individuals the philosophy and tactics of contemporary “promotional culture,” in which information, economics, and persuasion are inextricably linked.²

What Is Self-Branding?

In August 1997, on the cusp of the dot-com boom, Tom Peters wrote an article for internet-gold-rush magazine *Fast Company* called “The Brand Called You.” Apart from Peters’s mention of his new CD-ROM, the article reads as if it was written in 2009 or 2011.

The main chance is becoming a free agent in an economy of free agents, looking to have the best season you can imagine in your field, looking to do your best work and chalk up a remarkable track record, and looking to establish your own micro equivalent of the Nike swoosh. Because if you do, you’ll not only reach out toward every opportunity within arm’s (or laptop’s) length, you’ll not only make a noteworthy contribution to your team’s success—you’ll also put yourself in a great bargaining position for next season’s free-agency market. The good news—and it is largely good news—is that everyone has a chance to stand out. Everyone has a chance to learn, improve, and build up their skills. Everyone has a chance to be a brand worthy of remark.³

This concept was a response to several social changes: the success of huge corporate brands, the rise of project-based work cultures and entrepreneurial labor models, and the gradual popularization of the internet. As Peters explained, the web made it possible for anyone to have a website, and brands distinguished mediocrity from quality. He advised readers to identify their distinguishing characteristics and write a fifteen-word statement differentiating themselves

from their peers. He told workers to think of their skills using the “feature-benefit” model of major corporate brands: every feature generates a corresponding benefit for the customer, the employer. Peters instructed readers to ask themselves: “What do I want to be famous for? That’s right—famous!”

This article spawned a slew of personal branding books—*Me 2.0*, *The 10Ks of Personal Branding*, *Authentic Personal Branding*—by new personal branding experts. Technology meetups continue to hold sessions on self-branding, and entire conferences, such as Brand Camp University and Brand Camp NYC, are devoted to the topic. Dan Schawbel, a personal branding guru, launched *Personal Branding* magazine in 2008. It comes out quarterly in PDF format and contains interviews with personalities like Vanna White and M. C. Hammer. In the wake of the 2008 economic recession, personal branding transcended white-collar consulting and technology, and became a popular career strategy for people in all industries.

Self-branding is primarily a series of marketing strategies applied to the individual. It is a set of practices and a mindset, a way of thinking about the self as a salable commodity that can tempt a potential employer. Self-branding, the strategic creation of an identity to be promoted and sold to others, has moved beyond its origins—the modern culture of creative, entrepreneurial labor in Silicon Valley and an association with the dot-com boom—to become a staple of career counseling and employment advice.⁴ Self-branding, which would be impossible without the affordable means of information distribution that the internet provides, is intrinsically linked to the features of social media technologies that make self-promotion on a wide scale possible.

While founding a company or working independently certainly can be creatively fulfilling, this option isn’t available to everyone. The most successful self-branders are white-collar professionals with creative or engineering capacities, or people selling goods and services over the internet. In other words, the Web 2.0 workers I interviewed

function as the “proof” that self-branding, and entrepreneurial governance in general, works, but only in exceptional cases. Championing self-branding as a universal solution for economic woes demonstrates the disconnect between neoliberal ideals of identity—which emphasize self-improvement, responsibility for skill acquisition, and self-surveillance—and the reality of day-to-day life.

Most academics are quite disparaging of self-branding. They argue that practitioners remake themselves as products to be sold to large corporations, that they rely on an imaginary sense of what employers might want, and that they sully personal feelings and relationships with market forces.⁵ Self-branding, while widely taken up in the tech scene, is inherently contradictory. It promotes both “authenticity” and business-targeted self-presentation. This incongruity creates tension and stress for practitioners, who must engage in emotional labor and self-surveillance to ensure an appropriate branded persona. The experiences of a young man named Ben, whom I met in line for a taco truck while outside a networking event at the San Francisco club Mighty, are illustrative. Ben told me that he struggled with self-branding strategies, because he was at an early stage of his career and hadn’t figured out his main interests. He was baraged by advice to market himself and found it useless, but the continual emphasis on self-branding drowned out any other useful guidance.

Others told me that they disliked personal branding’s emphasis on audience. Caroline McCarthy, a former C|Net tech journalist who by 2012 had thirty thousand Twitter followers, said “Honestly, for me, it’s kind of scary because I don’t want to be a brand pusher. I don’t want everybody listening, but they are.” Even in 2009 the term was such a cliché that when I interviewed Rdio employee April Buchert (now Walters) about her experience volunteering at an “unconference” called LaidOffCamp, she said, “A lot of personal branding [workshops] in the afternoon, which is one of the reasons I was so happy to be in the coat check. Because it was like ‘Ahh, no thanks.’”

Bombastic blogger Stowe Boyd also had no problem criticizing the self-branding idea, which he compared to Freudian psychology and multitasking, two widely accepted ideas that in his opinion were invalid:

The self-branding thing, the thing that you're treating yourself like you are a product, is a relatively new meaning that's only been around about 15 years. But, it's so embedded now into the American psyche. I mean, it's like Freudian psychology in the '50s. It's like you couldn't argue against it even though there was absolutely no evidence to suggest that it was true, that Freudian psychology had any therapeutic benefits. Self-branding is like that now. It's commonplace, you can't convince people that it's an un-useful metaphor because everyone takes it for granted.

Boyd's intelligence, hubris, and self-confidence come through in his easy dismissal of Freudian psychology and personal branding. He felt that the complete inundation of self-branding into his social milieu was an instance of the "emperor has no clothes." Stowe explained further on his personal blog:

I don't buy the personal branding metaphor. Remember that metaphors are not "true" or "false": [they're] inductive. If the listener doesn't get it, or buy into it, a metaphor fails. For me, objectifying ourselves as products just rubs me the wrong way. I am not a product I am trying to sell. I am a person, and I want to be respected, listened to, influential. As I wrote earlier this week, it is ok to want to make a difference in the world, to influence others, and to take actions that make that more likely . . . It's only natural. But we can simply talk about reputation, authority, and influence, and drop the '90s personal branding mumbo-jumbo, now.⁶

Boyd thought the tech scene's wide acceptance of self-branding rhetoric was ridiculous. Not only did he believe it to be ineffective; he found the idea of self-commodification distasteful. But he recognized that these ideas had wide currency in the tech scene.

Such insider critiques are rare, perhaps because the industry is already saturated in the primacy of business language and philosophy. Overwhelmingly, San Francisco technology workers during the period I studied looked to self-branding as a powerful and necessary strategy. But self-branding should not go uncriticized; rather, it needs to be analyzed on both an individual and community-based level. That analysis should include an understanding of how the social becomes economic and vice versa. It should question how people describe the fantasy of personal branding, and how market-centered practices fulfill or neglect self-branders' needs. We must understand the concrete effects of self-branding—a neoliberal technology of subjectivity—on the practitioners themselves.

Modeling the Self-Brand

Self-branding fits within technology culture's strong autodidactic tradition. Self-taught coding, hacking, or networking skills demonstrate inquisitiveness, drive, and intelligence. But in Web 2.0 culture, entrepreneurs rather than programmers provide models for social media success; building businesses, rather than software, is important.⁷ As such, people have created entire careers by teaching entrepreneurial techniques to technology enthusiasts. Two examples are Gary Vaynerchuk and Tim Ferriss, independent entrepreneurs who thumb their noses at the status quo way of doing things while emphasizing self-branding and marketing. Vaynerchuk's and Ferriss's popularity in the tech sector—and they are very popular—derives significantly from their embodiment of the entrepreneurial ideal. Neither are programmers; instead, they are proficient at social media like online video, Twitter, and blogs. While both men are

selling their personal approach to professional success to similar people, they resemble competing corporate brands.

Vaynerchuk is the founder of an online liquor store called WineLibrary.tv and a social media consulting company called Vaynermedia. He's written two best-selling business books, *Crush It!* and *The Thank You Economy*; has almost a million Twitter followers; and is a fixture on the conference circuit. Ferriss is a martial-arts champion, former CEO of an herbal supplement company, and author of three number-one *New York Times* bestsellers: *The 4-Hour Work Week*, *The 4-Hour Body*, and *The 4-Hour Chef*.⁸ Both men have successfully positioned themselves as maverick self-starters who use lectures and books to teach others how to be successful financially and personally using social media. If Vaynerchuk is Pepsi, Ferriss is Coke.

Neither Vaynerchuk nor Ferriss are technologists, but their advice is targeted directly at the technology community. Ferriss said in an interview with blogger Derek Sivers: "I went after the audiences that read a handful of tech blogs in Silicon Valley. That was the niche I wanted because I knew that even though they represent a small number of people geographically, they are the loudest and most prolific online. By winning a fan base of 100 technophiles that spend most of their time online, then if people attack me online, . . . I would have other people defending it."⁹ Ferriss strategically targets his work to members of the tech scene because they have online influence far beyond their actual numbers. The self-help techniques that Ferriss and Vaynerchuk advocate use social media invented in Northern California (Twitter, YouTube, Facebook) and reinforce concepts like meritocracy, independence, and entrepreneurship, which are highly valued within the tech scene and its global fan base. Ferriss and Vaynerchuk are self-improvement gurus in the tradition of Oprah, televangelists, and Landmark Forum facilitators, but they emphasize the technolibertarianism of Silicon Valley rather than therapeutic, Christian, or New Age principles.

Both Vaynerchuk and Ferriss teach readers to present an identity divorced from interpersonal relationships and social ties. Instead,

the self exists in a competitive, insecure business environment, and acts primarily through social media.

Gary Vaynerchuk

Everyone—EVERYONE—needs to start thinking of themselves as a brand. It is no longer an option; it is a necessity.

—Gary Vaynerchuk¹⁰

Gary Vaynerchuk's career began as a liquor store owner. Vaynerchuk, known throughout the tech industry as Garyvee, inherited Shopper's Discount Liquors from his father, and claims that he increased the store's yearly revenue from four to fifty million dollars in eight years.¹¹ To promote his business, Gary created a series of five-minute wine review videos called WineLibrary.tv, which concluded in 2011 after a thousand episodes. He pinpoints the video series as the start of "building his personal brand." The success of this series, along with his blog and Twitter stream, made Garyvee a sought-after speaker, owner of a social media consulting firm, and best-selling author (he received a million dollar advance on his seven-book deal with Harpers). He is known for his hyper, excitable stage presence and frequent use of profanity ("Social media doesn't mean jack shit").¹² He also claims to respond to anyone who e-mails or @replies him.¹³

Gary is personable and charismatic and his aggressive methods have gained him many fans among aspiring entrepreneurs. He has almost 900,000 Twitter followers and was named by *BusinessWeek* someone "every entrepreneur should follow." *Crush It!*, the book that teaches the Garyvee method of success, debuted at number two on the *New York Times* bestseller list; despite tepid reviews (*Publishers Weekly* noted that "his unappealing swagger—repeated stories of how he crushed it and dominated grate particularly—gives his story more the tone of adolescent peacocking than of worthwhile and sober business advice"), it has a four-and-a-half-star rating on Amazon with 520 reviews. Vaynerchuk followed *Crush It!* with *The*

Thank You Economy, targeted at business owners. He crowd-sourced the cover design.

Crush It! is a slim book with large type (it's only 142 pages long). The book claims that great financial rewards will come to anyone who follows his or her passion and uses social media to broadcast about it. To Gary, a "passion" is what someone cares about the most, whether that be tortilla chips, worms, or marketing, all of which Gary advises turning into a personal brand and leveraging across all forms of social media including Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and YouTube. Vaynerchuk claims that anyone who creates outstanding content, about anything, will benefit accordingly, whether by commanding enormous speaking fees, getting paid for blog advertisements, or landing television interviews. He himself serves as a walking billboard that this method works.

Vaynerchuk doesn't advocate promoting a company, a product, or a service. He advocates promoting the individual; what the individual actually produces or does is secondary to his or her self-promotional skills. Unlike most self-branding guides, Vaynerchuk does not guide the reader through exercises or worksheets. Rather, he maintains that success will come if you work hard enough. While Gary has three maxims (love your family, work superhard [*sic*], and live your passion), the book focuses on the latter two, since he advocates working pretty much all the time:

Live your passion. What does that mean, anyway? It means that when you get up for work every morning, every single morning, you are pumped because you get to talk about or work with or do the thing that interests you the most in the world. You don't live for vacations because you don't need a break from what you're doing—working, playing, and relaxing are one and the same. You don't even pay attention to how many hours you're working because to you, it's not really work. You're making money, but you'd do whatever it is you're doing for free.¹⁴

In the last quarter of the book, Vaynerchuk outlines a thirteen-point program that anyone can follow to achieve financial success. The reader should begin by choosing a passion and learning everything he or she can about it, “absorbing every single resource you can find.” Like most personal branding gurus, Vaynerchuk advises buying a domain name and registering the same username at every social media site. He then tells readers to “start pumping out content.”¹⁵ “Content” is an industry term for what used to be called “writing” or “articles,” but now includes blog entries, tweets, videos, audio, podcasts, and even profiles on social network sites. Once the reader has written a blog post or made a video, Garyvee tells them to spend hours on other blogs and on Twitter posting links to it. Vaynerchuk says “if that sounds tedious or repetitive, just close this book and go do your best to enjoy the life you’ve got because you’re not cut out for this.”¹⁶ With all his talk of loving life and living with passion, Vaynerchuk is primarily advocating that self-branders create linkspam.

There’s also the detail of actually making money. Vaynerchuk claims that with this method the “big fish will be jumping straight into your hands.”¹⁷ He suggests putting ads on your blog, getting on the lecture circuit, selling products, using affiliate links, writing articles, holding seminars, and “consulting.” The chapter devoted to money-making is short (ten pages) and vague; Vaynerchuk earnestly explains that the best content will rise to the top and opportunities will somehow appear for anyone who uses this method. He believes that his own success story is easily replicated, and he cites celebrity blogger Perez Hilton and comedian Andy Samberg as role models—even though neither used these techniques.

It’s debatable whether vague promises of financial opportunities are worth eliminating one’s work-life balance. Vaynerchuk suggests that every social opportunity, including picnics and weddings, is a networking opportunity; tells readers to work at home between 7 P.M. and 2 A.M. after their regular eight to five job; and advocates focusing on the “hustle” over spending time with friends and family.

Anything insane has a price. If you're serious about building your personal brand, there will be no time for Wii. There will be no time for Scrabble or book club or poker or hockey. There will be time for meals, and catching up with your significant other, and playing with the kids, and otherwise you will be in front of your computer until 3:00 A.M. every night. If you're employed or retired and have all day to work, maybe you knock off at midnight instead. Expect this to be all consuming.¹⁸

Although Vaynerchuk repeats "love your family" as an essential part of success, time with loved ones is sandwiched between long stretches of time on Twitter. This also assumes, of course, that the person crushing it has someone else to do housework; isn't a primary caregiver for kids or aging relatives; doesn't go to the gym or therapy or AA meetings; has the stamina to subsist on minimal sleep; and doesn't value interests outside of work. Being your best, in Vaynerchuk's world, is being a marketable version of yourself twenty-four hours a day.

Ultimately, *Crush It!* suggests that if you aren't a success after doing all this late-night hustling, it is simply because you aren't working hard enough. Vaynerchuk warns, "Someone with less passion and talent and poorer content can totally beat you if they're willing to work longer and harder than you are."¹⁹ Balancing "life" with "work," in Vaynerchuk's eyes, is simply laziness. He writes: "No matter how successful you get, you cannot slack off or the grass is going to grow, the paint is going to peel, and the roads will start to crumble. Stop hustling, and everything you learn here will be useless. Your success is entirely up to you."²⁰ This rhetoric places the onus of responsibility on the individual for financial success or failure. *Crush It!* tells readers that one's failure to achieve prosperity is never due to structural equality, a lousy economy, or stagnating wages; instead, it is the worker's fault. When taken to its logical conclusion, such rhetoric justifies the elimination of social services like unemployment benefits and welfare, if the only people who use them are

lazy. The “Crush It” method also equates financial success with meritocracy. The affluent are so because they are better than everyone else. Unfortunately, neither of these presuppositions is supported by empirical evidence. Web 2.0’s emphasis on pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps entrepreneurialism is simply a rehash of conservative and libertarian sloganeering.

In reality, even if Garyvee’s methods do generate wealth for some people, they are unsustainable for most. Vaynerchuk doesn’t mention that “crushing it” requires, at minimum, a white-collar job and technical skills. Gary himself has unusual charisma and entrepreneurial spirit, and a multi-million dollar family business to fall back on. *Crush It!*’s methods systematically exclude women (who are the majority of caregivers), single parents, people with disabilities, and a whole host of others from “succeeding” using these tactics. (Does this mean they are just lazy?) Gary’s extraordinary success has yet to be replicated by the legion of followers attempting to “Crush It” through homemade videos about accounting and real estate, most of which imitate Vaynerchuk’s brash spirit. Gary’s followers seem mostly to work in technology and marketing; it’s apparently harder to “monetize” a passion for secretarial work, social justice, or community gardening than a passion for wine, entrepreneurship, or real estate.

Vaynerchuk renders the self an “it,” a “passion,” implying that “crushing it” is both fun and compulsive, that the worker has no choice but to “live” his or her passion. The worker’s relentless self-promotional labor is thus naturalized and made invisible through the language of desire. The phantasm of “crushing it” is the latest in a long line of American fantasies of self-realization, from Dianetics to *The Secret*. What’s new is the social media wrinkle. In Vaynerchuk’s world, social media provides the means to broadcast one’s self-promotion far and wide. Like most social media evangelists, Gary derides the one-to-many model of media and emphasizes talking to customers and networking with others. But in many ways these are just good public relations strategies, reworked to adhere to the norms of social media. There is no true collaborative, networked,

or open-source culture to crushing it. Instead, social media becomes a way for frustrated white-collar workers to support themselves while working eighty-hour weeks. But his ideas are tremendously popular. This fantasy is clearly one that people want to buy into.

Tim Ferriss: The 4-Hour Guru

I believe that life exists to be enjoyed, and that the most important thing is to feel good about yourself.

—Tim Ferriss²¹

The 4-Hour Work Week's author, Timothy Ferriss, is the type of guy who brags about winning a gold medal in Chinese kickboxing by pushing his opponents off an elevated platform. Ferriss is an infamous self-promoter and a consummate personal brander (*Wired* named him the top self-promoter of 2008, which he promptly added to his official bio.) His first book, *The 4-Hour Work Week*, has been a bestseller since its publication, and his second book, *The 4-Hour Body*, debuted at number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list. (He also received a million-dollar advance from Amazon's new publishing imprint for *The 4-Hour Chef*, a cookbook/self-help amalgam published in late 2012 that describes Ferriss as a cross between Jason Bourne and Julia Child.) Ferriss's version of "hacking"—which he defines as getting the biggest result for the smallest amount of work—focuses on entrepreneurship, travel, and self-experimentation. His first book introduced the concept of the "muse," a product that generates plenty of income but requires little supervision, giving one enough time to pursue his or her passions: wakeboarding, visiting Asia, or learning gourmet cooking; in short, living the life of the "new rich." His *4-Hour Body* diet is popular among the technorati and endorses "body hacks" like nutritional supplements, ice packs on the back of the neck, and calorie-rich "cheat days" over regular exercise and a careful diet. He is an angel investor in a number of popular startups like Twitter and Reputa-

tionDefender, speaks frequently at conferences like Foo Camp and TED, and regularly appears in the media. He has a sporadic online video show with Digg founder Kevin Rose, where they discuss the minutia of everyday life.²² Ferriss is currently promoting an exclusive, \$10,000-ticket marketing conference called “Opening the Kimono” where he will reveal the secrets of his success.

Unlike Gary Vaynerchuk, who focuses on working more, Ferriss focuses on working *less*. The “4-Hour” in the titles of his books refers to the amount of time working, or working out, to achieve financial or corporeal success. His get-rich- and get-thin-quick techniques are tremendously popular online; he has more than 300,000 Twitter followers and 100,000 “likes” on Facebook, and he claims a million blog visitors a month. The *New York Times* followed him through South by Southwest and wrote, somewhat bemusedly, that “at nearly every turn, young bespectacled men with Silicon Valley dreams approach.”²³ Each post on *Tim Ferriss’s Blog* has more than a hundred comments from his (primarily male) supporters, like “I may be an expert but from Tim Ferriss there’s always a new angle to learn from!” and “I’m going to see how I can assimilate your body language and style in general to public events.” While his readers use him as a role model, Tim uses his blog community as a test market; he explained that his readers function as “open-source clinical trials to test the diets and the workouts.”²⁴ He frequently asks for feedback and solicits testimonials from his fans. While his three books are quite different, the common threads are self-experimentation, “hacking,” challenging conventional wisdom, and improving oneself.

The 4-Hour Work Week is replete with exercises and worksheets for the potential entrepreneur. Ferriss advocates living like a millionaire, making just enough money to take “mini-retirements,” which involve trips to foreign places to wholeheartedly pursue hobbies and activities. He also advocates a process called “dreamlining,” which involves brainstorming goals like the adolescently masculine “own an Aston Martin DB9” and “find smart and gorgeous girlfriend,” and coming up with concrete plans to achieve them, which involves determining how much money these goals would cost. To pay for all

this, Ferriss suggests leaving traditional employment and choosing a muse. In practice, his disciples tend to sell “information products” like weight loss e-books or DVDs about real estate speculation. The muse can only be self-sufficient with copious use of outsourced and freelance labor to answer customer e-mails, manufacture products, make websites, and do personal errands.

The book’s emphasis on entrepreneurship is a reaction to modern anxieties over the rapid business transitions brought about by new technologies. Ferriss provides step-by-step guides to tools like Google AdWords, automated sales templates, search engine optimization, online shopping carts, and print-on-demand services so that readers can determine, test, and launch their muses. He describes people who take advantage of these tools to work remotely or start their own businesses as the “new rich” with control over “what you do, when you do it, where you do it, and with whom you do it,” which he refers to as the “freedom multiplier.”²⁵

The 4-Hour Work Week is also a response to social anxiety over outsourcing and the loss of American competitiveness in the global economy. Rather than worrying whether one’s job will be outsourced to Bangalore, Ferriss teaches readers to use virtual personal assistants (VPAs), workers in India who do errands and research for four to twenty dollars an hour, to deal with research tasks, customer service, and even relationships—Ferriss retells a writer’s account of using a VPA to apologize to his wife. The affordability of these services is only possible due to the exchange rate and labor differentials between the United States and developing countries like India. Similarly, Ferriss encourages his readers to travel for extended periods of time to countries where the cost of living is significantly lower, like Argentina and Thailand. He writes, “If you can free your time and location, your money is automatically worth 3–10 times as much.”²⁶

The second step of Ferriss’s plan, “E is for Elimination,” is full of tricks to decrease workload, like eradicating small talk, refusing to attend meetings, answering e-mail only once or twice a day, and maintaining an “information-poor diet” by ignoring blogs and news sources to boost productivity to the point where the reader can

actually work a “four hour work week.” Obviously, the reader must have a white-collar desk job in management, marketing, or business, with plenty of phone calls, meetings, and e-mails to answer. His techniques are not so useful for people in service industries, manufacturing, or labor.

Instead of spending time on work, Ferriss believes in a life of constant self-improvement. While Ferriss does recommend splurging on a few big-ticket items that the reader really wants, he also advocates paring down personal property to simplify travel. He exemplifies the lifehacking philosophy “to live is to learn” and recommends that the new rich spend their time traveling, learning new languages and skills (he mentions martial arts, a variety of athletics, ballroom dancing, and Irish flute), doing service work, and volunteering.²⁷ This fantasy lifestyle of “continual learning and service” represents the idealism of technology workers—who emphasize experience, intelligence, and travel—taken to the logical extreme.²⁸ Notably, Ferriss does not account for romantic or family relationships; he assumes that the reader is single with a lifestyle unencumbered by a partner, children, or friends.

Ferriss’s second book, *The 4-Hour Body*, is a mishmash of advice on corporeal activities like weight loss, sex, weightlifting, and recovery from injury. Ferriss’s emphasis mirrors the tech industry enthusiasm for endurance athletics like marathons, triathlons, and long-distance bicycle rides, but he highlights body hacks and self-quantification, not typical fitness regimes of diet and exercise. While his slow-carb diet does eliminate junk food in favor of lean proteins and vegetables, Ferriss advocates that readers only work out for about an hour a week, put Saigon Cinnamon in their coffee, and take a daily “supplement stack” called PAGG made up of policosanol, alpha-lipoic acid, green tea flavanols, and garlic extract. In a scathing and very funny review, the *New York Times* wrote, “*The 4-Hour Body* reads as if *The New England Journal of Medicine* had been hijacked by the editors of the *SkyMall* catalog. Some of this junk might actually work, but you’re going to be embarrassed doing it or admitting to your friends that you’re trying it.”²⁹

Most of *4-Hour Body* is harmless, if ridiculous, but its ideas about women are problematic. Like a pick-up artist or member of the online “seduction community,” Ferriss treats women as objects or trophies, every now and then tossing a bone to his female readers (“to the ladies, for whom peanut butter seems to be like crack, the tablespoon scoop should be no more than a small mound”). Other mentions of women are not so magnanimous:

I met “The Kiwi” in Buenos Aires, Argentina . . . his obsession started when he saw a professional samba dancer in Brazil balance tequila shots on top of each butt cheek in a dance club. Lamenting the lack of similar scenes in his own country, he set off on a mission to isolate the best exercises to create buttocks worthy of tequila shots . . . In four weeks, he took his then-girlfriend, an ethnic Chinese with a surf-boardlike profile, to being voted one of the top 10 sexiest girls out of 39,000 students at the University of Auckland.³⁰

This attitude—that women are the grateful subjects of male expert attention—is made the most explicit in a chapter entitled “The 15-Minute Female Orgasm.” While most people’s prurient interest would be aroused by the idea of a fifteen-minute-long orgasm, Ferriss really means that he is able to bring a woman to orgasm within fifteen minutes. He confides solemnly, “I was able to facilitate orgasms in every woman who acted as a test subject.”³¹ The book includes detailed diagrams of a fully-clothed man kneeling over a half-naked woman, clinically rubbing her clitoris. Ferriss explains, “I’ll explain this from the standpoint of a man, as that’s what I am, meng.”³²

This example points to a much larger problem with Ferriss’s approach; he universalizes a wealthy, white man’s experience as a workable method for others. Certainly life would be easier for many people if they were wealthy, white, and male, but Ferriss does not even seem to recognize, let alone account for, his own privilege.

Thus Ferriss reinscribes white normativity and heterosexual male privilege into his instructions. He encourages social media enthusiasts to adopt a subjectivity that's very specific, very limited, and very privileged. To Ferriss, like Vaynerchuk, the self is also an "it," an attainable fantasy of life. The labor of self-improvement is made invisible by framing it as excavating a newer, better self.

Learning a Neoliberal Ideal

Both *Crush It!* and *The 4-Hour Work Week* are instruction manuals for surviving without an economic safety net. Ferriss and Vaynerchuk assume that the changes that the internet has wreaked on industries like journalism and music are prescient of larger shifts in the American economy. They strongly advocate independence from corporate structures by encouraging people to start their own businesses. Both use the motivational language common to both neoliberalism and American self-help culture, extolling readers to imagine and bring about an ideal life. While in Vaynerchuk's world work is a passion and everyone can be an entrepreneur, Ferriss believes that constant self-improvement should be one's passion, with work existing only to pay for it. Since both Gary Vaynerchuk and Timothy Ferriss have legions of supporters who follow their instructions to the letter—their blogs contain hundreds of comments and video testimonials from grateful readers who found success using their methods—these techniques clearly work for some people. But both books present a fantasy life as realistic and desirable, and position strategic self-presentation within a commodity-based culture as the way to achieve it.

Moreover, both men present the professional male experience as normal, and anything else as an aberration, to the extent of describing tasks like childcare or dating as wastes of time. Vaynerchuk's advocacy of nonstop work is simply not realistic for people who want to live full lives. Derek Overby, for example, described how his nonstop use of social media created problems at home:

My wife came out and just said, “What are you doing? You’re losing a connection with me and, more importantly, your kids.” I was like, “Wow.” That was eye-opening, like having to go to rehab or something. [Laughs.] Social media rehab. So I just kind of took a good look at it and said, “Maybe I’m going a little overboard.” I was really trying to establish myself within the circles, so I just toned it down a lot. So now I go home and I’ll maybe stay up until 9:30 or 10:00, then I just shut it off and say, “I’ve got to have a real life, too.”

Unlike many, Overby could rely on his partner to take care of their children so he could work late hours. Even with this support, the lack of separation between work and the rest of life, a common Silicon Valley ideal, alienated Overby from the people most important to him—his family. His compromise, working until 10 P.M., still makes it challenging to equitably participate in childcare or household duties. The unspoken assumption of *Crush It!* is that to have a family, a subservient partner is needed to do all that work. Ferriss does not even address family or relationships: instead he promotes a male fantasy of travel, ripped abs, and frequent casual sex.

Ferriss and Vaynerchuk may be easy targets, but they are superstars in the Web 2.0 world. If these are the type of men who are held up as icons, what does that say about the culture of the technology industry? I think Vaynerchuk and Ferriss are successful for two reasons. First, they uphold the values of the tech community by emphasizing passion, business success, self-improvement, and meritocracy. They do not criticize or interrogate anything that the tech community holds dear. Second, they evangelize tools developed by the tech community like blogs, Twitter, YouTube, online advertising, and so forth. Overall, both men emphasize Web 2.0’s revolutionary impact on business, employment, the self, and even the body. This reinforces the Web 2.0 scene’s sense of itself as uniquely special, smart, and socially revolutionary.

But the ideals furthered by Ferriss and Vaynerchuk are not revolutionary. While a worker is busy creating a self-brand, build-

ing an entrepreneurial self, monitoring Google Alerts, building a website, writing free articles for newspapers, giving free seminars, and doing various other forms of free labor, who benefits from her unpaid labor? In Ferriss's case, the get-rich-quick techniques he advocates can only be pursued by a few people before becoming unsustainable; not everyone can game Google AdWords.³³ The class position that these books assume, and with it assumptions about gender, race, and sexuality, go unmentioned in both *Crush It!* and *The 4-Hour Work Week* but are reinforced in *The 4-Hour Body*.

Regardless of how realistic or specific self-branding and self-commodification techniques are, they have been taken up enthusiastically by people in the technology industry and the distributed network of people who want to be in the technology industry. These ideas have trickled down and are being played out in interpersonal interactions both on and offline.

Self-Branding and Web 2.0

It is no coincidence that self-branding is contemporaneous with the Web. Internet technologies have made it possible for people to apply sophisticated branding strategies used by modern multinational companies to themselves, and social media in particular has allowed individuals with internet access to broadcast to the world in an affordable way.³⁴ Perhaps due to its origins in the dot-com boom, self-branding has had a remarkably wide reach within the technology industry.

"I've kind of self-branded myself as a digital anthropologist," Ariel Waldman told me, "because a lot of what I do, and what I get paid to do, is [to] be actively involved in online interactions." Waldman had worked in several different areas of the technology industry, and the term "digital anthropologist" captured well her job skills, giving her a distinctive but easily understood title with which to market herself to potential employers. Similarly, I met a man at a conference who called himself a "change agent," which is similar to

WordPress employee Marianne Masculino's formal business title of "happiness engineer." These terms use advertising and marketing terminology to describe aggressively a set of skills and tasks in a catchy and appealing way that is easily consumable by potential employers.

Even people with more traditional job titles used self-branding strategies. Tara Hunt described herself as "an author, speaker, consultant, and marketing strategist, with a heavy focus on online strategy," as did Anu Nigam, who called himself a "serial entrepreneur and an angel investor." Both used enterprise language to mark themselves as modern workers in the high-technology sector. Hunt positioned herself above the average marketing drone by describing herself as an author, speaker, and consultant. Similarly, while Nigam called himself a "serial entrepreneur," a high-status term for someone who launches several successful startups, he had worked as a rank-and-file engineer for many of his former employers. These techniques—coining slogans to describe oneself and emphasizing the positive—are key parts of self-branding.

Because websites are affordable compared to television or newspaper advertisements, which are prohibitively expensive for most individuals, many tech enthusiasts have recognized them as a way to participate more effectively in an attention economy. Tantek Çelik explained why he owns www.tantek.com: "You're basically putting yourself on the same footing as a company. So that's status, right? Like companies have URLs. Well, I have my own URL. I don't need to have my Facebook or whatever, I have my domain." To Tantek, his dot-com domain let him occupy an online position equivalent to, yet independent from, a major consumer brand. Leah Culver agreed. "So if you can own your name, in that your first name associated with being a person is you, that's pretty good, right? Matt Mullenweg is really proud of this. He owns the top search results for Matt. His business card says go to Google, type in Matt, and press 'I'm feeling lucky.'" As self-branding expert Dan Schawbel writes:

As more people tune into media online, you have more of an opportunity to broadcast your brand and command exposure for your personal niche. That is not to say that if you appear on TV, the radio, or in print magazines, your brand won't gain exposure, but these expensive options are out of reach for most personal brands. The internet, by far the cheapest medium you can use to build an audience, is leveling the playing field.³⁵

During the period of my study, Web 2.0 workers, well aware of the significance of global technology brands, used internet technology to reconfigure themselves into brands with the same potential significance as those produced by corporations.

People in technology agreed with self-branding consultants that a successful personal brand involves a distinct username (like gary-vee or, in my case, alicetiara), multiple social media accounts, the distribution of content using the internet, and the promotion of this content using social media.³⁶ My informants concurred that potential personal branders should at least have a central web presence. Leah Culver summarized, "So the personal branding includes your domain name and your blog and if you do projects, a list of projects that you worked on and here's the link to my projects." Julia Allison gave a workshop on personal branding at the Learning Annex in which she laid out a website structure including sections called Meet Me, Work with Me, E-mail Me, Social Media Links, Blog, Articles, Videos, Press, Recommendations, and Best Of.³⁷

The internet makes it possible to disseminate this personal information on an exponentially greater scale than in the past. Online, average Americans can distribute content globally, instantly, and cheaply. Before the internet, a prospective self-brander was limited to putting up fliers at grocery stores, knocking on neighbors' doors, buying advertisements in the local paper, or attending potentially inaccessible industry-only events. None of these techniques could reach more than a limited local audience. Self-branding books still advise

people to create traditional self-promotional material like resumes, portfolios, and newsletters, but the internet makes distribution of this content inexpensive and simple. Self-branding involves not only creating an image of oneself, but also making that image visible to others. Even if their content is only viewed by a handful of people, self-branders argue that their potential audience is in the millions.

This networked visibility promises practitioners fame and wealth on a global scale. Venture capitalist Anu Nigam explained the process by which people used Twitter and blogging to advance their careers:

There's a lot of people out there trying to get attention and trying to be famous. And that's just what's happening as technology enters the mainstream and now it's become a worldwide thing where the brand matters. Actually, that's what blogging has done. In general, if you write a book too, it's brand identity and people are paying for your brand now. They're paying for you to write. They're paying for you to join, when they hire you there, they want your skillset and they also want to tell everyone.

My informants agreed that self-branding was a career-benefiting move. When the financial software company Intuit hired Tara Hunt, who had built a strong reputation using Twitter and her blog *HorsePigCow*, they accessed her extended network of fans and followers, and made themselves look savvy for hiring a well-known social media user.³⁸ For freelancers, contractors, or consultants, self-promotion was necessary to find a steady stream of clients.

Creating and distributing online content was seen as way to create expertise without holding a professional job in a desired field. I asked Veronica Belmont how she would advise someone to make it big in San Francisco. She responded:

Looking for a job in your industry, whether it's podcasting or blogging, I always suggest that people start their own

podcast or start their own blog, and just write about the things that they are really passionate about and that they really love. That way there is something to fall back to, when they put their resume out there, they can say, “Look, I’ve been covering the subject for two years now in my personal blog and I’m obviously versed on the subject.” I think that goes a long way on getting jobs and with getting your name out there.

Belmont mirrors the language of “passion” when describing her job. In practice, this method could work out, as social media presence can substitute for a job title or company affiliation (although this is not necessarily the case outside of Silicon Valley). Megan McCarthy explained:

Silicon Valley is very forgiving of strangers who just show up at the doorstep. I mean, you can have any hook whatsoever that gets you in. The company you work for can do that like if you’re with a hot startup, like if someone is like, “Oh, I work for Digg.” You instantly say, “OK, that’s that type of person.” It sort of gives you entrance or a membership in a tribe, almost, but you can also create your own legitimacy. You can just start blogging every day, like “Hi, oh, I’m Megan. I write for My Blog,” and then suddenly it’s like, “Oh, OK, that’s great. You’re a blogger,” and that makes sense to people.

As previously mentioned, McCarthy began her career blogging about tech parties on *Valleywag* for a few hundred dollars a month and is now a full-fledged technology journalist and editor despite her lack of formal training. McCarthy’s affiliation with a well-known technology brand opened doors for her, but this legitimization can also be done with a personal blog.³⁹

The technical features of social media reward attention, making the potential audience clearly visible to the user by turning ephemeral status or reputation information into quantifiable metrics, such

as blog analytics, number of Facebook friends, or Twitter followers. Comments, references, Facebook “Likes,” and Twitter @replies indicate the user’s value, rewarding the ability to provoke the awareness of others. Within self-branding ideology, success intrinsically involves the actions of others, thus marking status through visibility and attention. These metrics for “success” differentiate self-branding from business-oriented self-help guides like Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, published in 1934. Self-branding presumes that the broadcasting and connective capacities of Web 2.0 technologies make the subject available and intelligible to others. It is both this visibility and the presence of a network that make self-branding seem possible.

In the Scene

Beyond social media, successful Web 2.0 entrepreneurs had to promote and maintain their personal brands in everyday interactions as well. The culture of personal branding was reinforced and replicated in these moments, further cementing the necessity of the strategy. Sarah Lacy, a technology journalist whose first book, *Once You’re Lucky, Twice You’re Good*, was about 2.0 culture, explained: “I think being Sarah Lacy the reporter is blogging, is doing my show, you know, going out and reporting, going to dinners. I think having to be Sarah Lacy the brand is being on TV, being on radio, giving speeches, going to parties, being visible, being out there.” In practice, there is little discernible difference between self-branding and self-promotion. Lacy saw self-branding as distinct from actual work, which she understood to be “writing and creating content.” She promoted “Sarah Lacy the brand” by speaking at conferences, networking, and doing media appearances to get plum assignments and drive book sales. This tactic is explicitly advocated by self-branding experts like Gary-vee. For instance, Dan Schawbel’s *Me 2.0* advocates writing personal press releases “to announce one’s brand to the world,” inculcating personal relationships with bloggers to encourage link-backs, and contributing to publications to reinforce an image as an expert.

In person, the most widely practiced self-branding skill was networking. Networking was ever-present during my time in San Francisco; each week brought a flurry of tech industry events with the primary goal of meeting other industry workers.⁴⁰ At these events, “everyone talks about work, not personal stuff,” I was told at a Lunch 2.0 event. Networking requires comfort with small talk, the ability to chat with anyone, and the talent to connect people with others whom they might want to meet. The typical networking interaction takes place between two people. The opening gambit is often “Who are you with?” meaning “What company do you work for?” This triggers the “pitch,” a summary of one’s business in thirty seconds or so, which ends with an action item like “we’re looking for funding,” or PR, or engineers. (People were remarkably candid about looking for venture capital.) Each person pitches the other, and the two spend a few minutes identifying and discussing commonalities, followed by exchanging cards and often ending the interaction by brokering an introduction to someone else.

The self-branding angle comes with the ability to successfully pitch to other people. Pitching “off book” (with a memorized “hook”) was absolutely necessary to network successfully. Here are some examples of pitches I heard:

We create a social mesh where people feel connected to each other with similar taste.

My job is to help people find interesting stuff on the Internet with very little effort.

It’s like Twitter, but for video. We have a launch event next month.

These pitches came from the founders of tiny startups; for entrepreneurs, the personal brand was aligned with their small company. For freelancers, the pitch statement was the personal brand. I had to learn my own pitch to be comfortable in networking environments. Without a pitch, conversation doesn’t flow smoothly, determining

commonalities is impossible, and the other person often becomes uncomfortable. My pitch went something like “I’m a Ph.D. student studying how people use social media to increase their status. I’m investigating self-branding, micro-celebrity, and livestreaming, and I’m looking for people in the industry to interview.” Creating this pitch took four or five months of practice.

Business cards are a physical instantiation of the personal brand. At networking events, people exchanged cards if there was even the slightest chance that they might be mutually useful (I returned from fieldwork with several hundred business cards). Business cards sometimes carried fanciful titles like “Director of Awesome” or “Mac Daddy,” but many people gave out personal cards designed to work with their brand identity. For example, one business card contained links to an individual’s website; Twitter, Facebook, and Skype accounts; e-mail; phone; and address, all using the same internet nickname. I was given a card at South by Southwest 2008 that read: “Hello, my name is Kathryn Finney, aka “The Budget Fashionista,” aka “America’s Best Shopper,” aka “The girl with the cool shoes.” I write a blog, which led to a book, which led to lots of TV, which led to a blog network. Email me at [e-mail address] or visit thebudgetfashionista.com. Happy Shopping.” The card is hot pink with a simple sans-serif font, succinctly conveying Finney’s brand: a friendly, frugal fashion guru with a budding media empire.

A final necessary component of self-branding was brand monitoring. Some people set up Google Alerts that e-mailed them whenever their name popped up online, or used Twitter and third-party software like TweetDeck to track how often they were @replied or re-tweeted. Others spent hours on Facebook, Flickr, or Google tracking search results for their name. Glenda Bautista, then head of product for video at AOL, describes this process: “Your personal brand is being affected by—your online identity is being developed by people around you. And again like it kind of touches on the point where I say, you know, ‘it’s not really within your control.’ You constantly have to police yourself. You constantly have to police other people, police your friends. Like nag them to take photos

down. It's exhausting." This brand monitoring becomes a form of labor that can be both emotional and taxing. It requires continually imagining oneself through the eyes of others, creating a "dual gaze" of internalized surveillance. Because most individuals developing a personal brand are connected to a networked audience in which their friends and family interact with their online presence, informants had to check on their friends' activities, like tagging photos on Flickr, TwitPic, Google Plus, or Facebook, to make sure that nothing they did in a social context showed up in more professional contexts.⁴¹ This caused conflicts when better-known people felt that others were using them for increased brand recognition through affiliation, a process that Bautista called "flooding": peppering content streams with mentions of high-status individuals even if they were not really close friends. In following the advice of Garyvee and other branding experts, people would push to demonstrate relational ties between themselves and their audience, even when genuine intimacy and interest were lacking. Interpersonal relationships were intertwined with self-branding efforts, and the two often clashed.

Maintaining the Edited Self

Social media technologies allow people to self-consciously construct images of themselves—the young executive, lauded entrepreneur, or glamorous television host. But the collaborative, networked audience of social media requires people to engage in unpaid labor to keep their brand image "pure." As Bautista noted, "People are in marketing here, whether they like it or not."

There are two points of view about how this came about. The first perspective, the technologically determinist view, implies that the technology itself dictates this type of self-presentation. It suggests some inherent property of contemporary social media technologies that promotes this enterprise view of the self. This view ignores the context in which technology is used; it is also empirically false since early social media like IRC (internet relay chat),

MUDs (multi-user dungeons), and Usenet allowed for similar interactions, but marketable self-presentations were largely absent. Instead, a sense of play and identity experimentation abounded in pre-Web internet spaces—something that is in short supply on sites like Facebook and strongly discouraged by self-branding.⁴²

A second viewpoint, and one that is closer to my perspective, is that social media enables many different self-presentation strategies, and due to current social circumstances, many people choose self-branding. The Web 2.0 culture is responsible for the behaviors we see, not the technology. Self-presentation involves using advertising and marketing strategies to sell the self, and since internet media are accessible in a way that television or radio advertising is not, social media allows for a level of strategic, business-focused identity construction that would be otherwise impossible. It's true that technologies like Facebook and Google Plus systematically discourage identity play by linking a single, presumably authentic self to a body of verifiable information, creating a persistent identity. But in technologies like Twitter, which can be used for all types of self-presentation, having a good reputation, and being trustworthy and authentic, play such an important role in self-branding theory that Web 2.0 aficionados use it to construct a single constructed identity leveraged across multiple media types. This self is "authentic" (in that it is not openly false), marketable (in that it fits safely into current business culture), and in line with the values of "enterprise culture," which associates those skills most useful to modern business as positive moral values: that is, it rewards those who are entrepreneurial, positive, self-motivated, and who provide information-rich content.

In other words, social media allows people to strategically construct an identity in ways that are deeply rooted in contemporary ideas that the self is autonomous and constantly improving.⁴³ But it is Web 2.0 culture that encourages this behavior by advancing a particularly neoliberal conception of the "enterprising self," one that advocates the use of technology for identity creation and presentation. In social media applications and Web 2.0 culture, identity can

be constructed, managed, and changed. Technologies let people choose strategically how they present themselves, from carefully selecting favorite artists for a Facebook profile to re-tweeting certain celebrities.⁴⁴ People imagine a self or a life and use social media technologies to bring this self into being. Want to be a cookbook author? Julia Child attended Le Cordon Bleu culinary school in Paris, taught students from her homes in France and Washington, D.C., and spent years testing recipes before attempting to write a book. *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* was rejected by Houghton Mifflin for being too long, and Child took several years to edit and revise the manuscript before submitting it to Knopf. Promotion did not begin until the book was finished.⁴⁵ Today, promotion, not cooking, is most important: start a food blog, make cooking videos and post them to YouTube, correspond with other food bloggers on Twitter, write newspaper and magazine articles, appear on television, and sign a book contract to write a cookbook.

In practice, most self-branding books and seminars begin with a series of exercises to define the personal brand, suggesting that everyone has an easily monetizable passion that needs only to be uncovered. Dan Schawbel in *Me 2.0* provides a “Personal Discovery Assistant” that helps readers “learn more about yourself, where you are right now, and where you want to be in the future.”⁴⁶ In *Make a Name for Yourself*, Robin Fisher Roffer outlines a “Developing Your Brand Description” worksheet, which encourages readers to fill in the statement “I’m [my brand] because [justification]” as a way of identifying their core values, passions, and talents within the context of a brand description.⁴⁷ These exercises imply that the reader is excavating a true, authentic self to present to an audience. Of course, the reader is “uncovering” only potentially profitable interests.

The second stage of self-branding is goal-setting. Ferriss calls this “dream-lining,” “an exercise in reversing repression” whereby the reader lists five things he or she dreams of having, being, and doing.⁴⁸ Roffer agrees, saying that “every respected brand has very specific objectives” while Catherine Kaputa of SelfBRAND LLC

claims that “without a tactical plan your success is left to chance.”⁴⁹ Like Pepsi or Microsoft, self-branders should set concrete goals.

Finally, readers are told to connect these two steps by strategically creating an audience-targeted identity. The blog *The Art of Self-Branding* suggests asking close friends and relatives to describe you in three words.⁵⁰ Julia Allison told her audience to prepare five documents:

1. Full bio: Write as if someone was writing a profile of you
2. One page: Narrow down; three or four paragraphs; who you are, what is your brand
3. Elevator pitch: 30 seconds
4. 140 characters: Appropriate for Twitter
5. Tag line: 2–3 words, e.g., Joe Blow, celebrity architect

Self-branding practitioners identify their strengths and goals and use advertising and marketing techniques to frame themselves for a potentially lucrative audience. Drawing from slogans, celebrity profiles, and public relations material, people are told to choose certain traits and experiences to show the public. Personal brand advocates advise acolytes to use social media to promote this newly created personal brand to potential clients, employers, and fans. Schawbel writes that people get “discovered” every day on social media; this is echoed by Gary Vaynerchuk who claims that the “best” expert in any field will be recognized and legitimated by mainstream media. Not only is this self the most easily marketed; it is strategically edited to appeal to potential customers and clients.

Laboring, Emotionally

While Web 2.0 ideology promises that self-branding is a means to find personal fulfillment and economic success, it explicitly instructs people to create and project a self-conscious persona—one that makes the world think they are entrepreneurial, knowledgeable, positive, and self-motivated—using tools drawn from commercial advertising. I call this persona the “edited self.” The edited

self requires real work to maintain. This edited self must remain business-friendly and carefully monitored, despite social media culture's advocacy of transparency and openness. The edited self is an entrepreneur whose product is a neatly packaged, performed identity. When people use social media to self-brand, they are encouraged to regulate themselves along the well-trod paths of enterprise culture, regardless of how much unpaid time this effort might require.⁵¹

In one way, this type of labor evolved from a long line of other types of unpaid work. The term "fan labor" was first used in cultural studies to discuss the myriad of activities undertaken by fans of shows like *Star Trek*, which included discussing episodes online, organizing conventions, and producing feature-length films.⁵² Theories of fan labor extended the idea of an "active audience" to show how fans engage in productive activities that financially and culturally benefit the creators of the original film, book, or television series. Following fan labor is "immaterial labor," a concept framed by Marxist-influenced cultural historians. Maurizio Lazzarato defined the term as "the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms and . . . public opinion."⁵³ This definition of "labor" would include tagging Facebook photographs, posting status updates on Twitter, and contributing to Wikipedia. Related is "affective labor," the positive benefits that people derive from these acts within a community, whether these are increased social status, intimacy, reputation, prestige, or self-satisfaction.⁵⁴ Others think of participation in social media frameworks, particularly commercial frameworks, as another kind of labor: through participation, the value of these sites is created and extracted, in the form of user data, viewings of advertisements, or click-throughs.⁵⁵ Many scholars consider this exchange uneven, and view "user-generated content" or "participatory culture" as a form of exploitation by the social software and culture industries.⁵⁶

While free labor has become a mainstay of digital communities, it is important to look at how this manifests in social software as

“emotional labor.” In her book *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild defined emotional labor as that which “requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.”⁵⁷ Emotional labor is a type of performance integrated into the nature of the job itself. For example, a hostess at a gourmet restaurant must, with her mannerisms, facial expressions, and the tone of her voice, embody the overall image of the chef and the food as well as extend seemingly genuine care to her customers. This type of forced behavior for a desired emotional affect occurs in varying degrees down the food chain of service work, as Deborah Cameron describes in her study of call center workers, who are required to evoke “smiling,” sincerity, and confidence while on the telephone with customers.⁵⁸

Web 2.0 enthusiasts engage in both immaterial and emotional labor to boost their popularity. This work requires revealing personal information, sometimes to the point of extreme discomfort or vulnerability; feigning and successfully performing interpersonal interactions; and creating a self that is simultaneously authentic and carefully edited. This self is immaterial in that it is digital, and emotional in that it involves using real emotional affect when presenting oneself and interacting with others. Self-branding, for instance, necessitates the careful construction of an edited yet authentic self, which demands ongoing self-monitoring, a thick skin, and an ongoing awareness and evaluation of the audience.

Many informants told me that there were significant negative emotional costs to self-branding, including anxiety, information overload, lack of time, and hurt feelings due to audience comments and interactions. Constantly monitoring one’s actions and maintaining a “dual gaze” was often exhausting and time consuming. Keeping up with the sheer amount of work that self-branding requires means neglecting other aspects of life. I asked Overby how he managed information overload:

Not very well. I do what I can do . . . I used to be so worried about it that I didn’t get back to people. There’re still people

that I haven't contacted since I got back from South By. And I feel really bad about that but I still have a job that I have to do and my side projects. I have to put my priorities in line. I have a family. I have two young children. So I have to do what I do. I spend a lot of nights up until midnight or 1:00 in the morning. So I don't get a lot of sleep. But I try to do as much as I can and then at the end of the day, you just have to hope that people understand that you're only one person.

Lacy admitted that she worked all the time, which differentiated her from her peer group of reporters. "For me, this is my entire life and I am fine with it being my entire life. I don't have any balance and there are just very few people who are willing to do that." Hunt agreed: "One [requirement for success] is a super-drive. Focus on that thing and focus on that thing only. You can't be all over the place. You are focused and obsessed with that one thing. You start up your idea so you can work 14 hours a day. You deny yourself sleep and a social life, and all that stuff. And you just focus on it." These comments reflect Garyvee's ideal of the constant hustler, a neoliberal subjectivity through which people organize themselves and their lives according to market principles. Interestingly, both Ferriss and Vaynerchuk use emotional, affective language to evangelize particular types of labor: think of "following your passion" or "crushing it." Just as one's peers determine what makes an interesting Twitter feed and *Valleywag* polices the right type of micro-celebrity, self-help gurus script what the "right" sort of affect looks like for social media users looking to capitalize on self-branding. The net effect of this policing is that self-branding, which requires both immaterial and emotional labor, has been both naturalized and gendered.

Several informants confessed that negative comments or e-mail "flames" from audience members had upset them or even made them cry. Even people who claimed that negative comments didn't affect them had developed coping mechanisms. Adam Jackson said: "I announced after that I'm going to start tagging negative comments and I'm going to turn it into a blog one day. So I did a hash tag,

‘#Dick.’ So from now on, when I get just a really asinine comment I’ll re-tweet it and hash tag it ‘#Dick.’ So now when someone says, ‘why are you so bitter over Twitter?’ I’ll just send them that to that hash tag and they can see all of that negative crap I get.” Ariel Waldman turned to her friends who had gone through similar things to ask for help. “[Sex blogger Violet Blue] just goes through a lot of shit online and so she’s become kind of this veteran of . . . whenever I’m going through, I guess, drama online of any sort, I kind of look up to her because she’s somehow weathered it.” People also found ongoing self-surveillance to be anxiety provoking, because they were engaged in a continuous loop of measuring themselves against an audience. As Glenda Bautista said, “A lot of my own anxieties have been developed by online judgments.”

Authenticity, as it is described in self-branding culture, is something absolute that can be found through self-examination, or perhaps through filling out workbook exercises. Authenticity is viewed as real, unqualified, and biological or even genetic. Vaynerchuk says: “Your DNA dictates your passion—whatever it is that you were born to do; being authentic, and being perceived as such by your audience, relies on your ability to ensure that every decision you make when it comes to your business is rooted in being true to yourself.”⁵⁹ This suggests that each person has an intrinsic value based on their possession of a singular, intrinsic, and moreover, marketable skill; it also implies that success is wrapped up in a sense of the “authentic self”—which, as discussed elsewhere, is a social construct. Putting it all together, this suggests that what is truthful or authentic is what is good for business. These are not values that are somehow inherent in internet technologies; rather, they are traditional market values that have been mapped over a new application: social media.

The myth that the personal brand represents the authentic self is belied by the need for constant monitoring. While micro-celebrities are supposed to reveal personal information to seem authentic, self-branders are encouraged to edit private moments in the name of brand consistency. Many people have been fired from their jobs for

truly authentic actions that they broadcast through social media—such as drinking alcohol, doing drugs, talking about politics, or having sex—because these actions do not fit a “businesslike” image. Thus personal branding books simultaneously tell people to “be themselves” while setting up a framework in which self-presentation is regulated and surveyed. Julia Allison advised her seminar audience that “if your brand doesn’t match up with who you really are, people will smell it”; she feels that she must disclose her use of hair extensions and plastic surgery or her audience will criticize her for being “fake.” At the same time, Allison bemoans that other people have labeled her an “oversharer” and a “famewhore” because she did not define herself well enough. Even while trumpeting authenticity, Web 2.0 enthusiasts generally accept the idea that one should self-censor online.

Thus self-branding contains a paradox: if one’s projected self is both “authentic” and “businesslike,” the assumption becomes that people never do anything that would be considered unbusinesslike, illegal, or controversial in any way. As Tantek Çelik summarizes: “For so long, there’s been this conservative assumption of authority. In other words, if you have authority or are in authority, you must be socially conservative, which is . . . merely a consensual assumption. There is no actual reason for it to be true at all.” Self-branding is not a reflection of actual life. It is about constructing a strategic self-image to appeal to a particular audience and furthering that image through every online and offline action. Clearly, there are a few occasions when the “authentic” self will be entirely acceptable as a business self; this is because we still have clear distinctions between acceptable behavior in social life and acceptable behavior in the workplace. If the Web 2.0 self is one that must be both entirely transparent and entirely business-oriented, that self cannot logically exist. Furthermore, this elimination of long-standing divisions between corporate life and social or home life is a myth—but even trying to blend the two requires a great deal of time, effort, and affective output. Those struggling to make it happen often feel discouraged from engaging in any nonbusinesslike behavior so they

can minimize the amount of intrigue or labor that is required. They try to avoid “not safe for work” situations all of the time, to the detriment of their real-life relationships and emotional health.

I observed two other serious drawbacks to self-branding and online promotion. The first was the risk of being fired by a more traditional company for engaging in self-branding. Although self-branding advocates maintain that everyone will need to engage in self-branding in the future, at many companies the interests of the entrepreneurial self do not line up with the interests of the enterprise. One acquaintance was fired for doing freelance work on the side, which her company considered “spreading herself too thin.” Ariel Waldman left a job after the organization asked her to stop talking about personal things in her Twitter stream, which she also used to promote company business. And in 2010, entrepreneur Jason Calacanis posted a diatribe against hiring “job-hoppers,” who exemplify the freelance, self-interested worker. He instead argued that startups should hire people willing to work for low salaries and long hours with the promise of equity.⁶⁰ It seems from these examples that there is an instability in the relationship between personal branding philosophies and corporate America. The ideal of having all workers be independent actors who can flourish without ties to larger corporations is a mythic element of neoliberalism rather than a reality. Even so, the economic downturn, with its mass firings, has made it difficult to generate the kind of company loyalty that Calacanis would require.

The second danger is coming off as too self-promotional and therefore narcissistic or uninterested in others. There is a sense, especially with regard to technologies like Twitter, that the service’s “proper” use is to share personal information with others. Using the channel as a one-to-many method of broadcast advertising is viewed as bad form and an indicator of low status.⁶¹ As mentioned in the discussion of ascribed versus achieved celebrity, while tech insiders may look down on people using Twitter to unashamedly spread content, the ability to amass huge numbers of followers does open doors (or at least it did while I was doing research). Additionally,

many people enthusiastically follow the teachings of Vaynerchuk, Ferriss, and their ilk, and support each other in achieving their goals. To those people, having large follower accounts and successfully self-promoting is a worthwhile goal. But to high-status members of the tech community, blatant self-promotion is *déclassé* and very uncool.

Although the social media scene is highly capitalist and involves an immense blurring of the lines between work and self, the community's adherence to self-branding mechanisms is not a wholesale acceptance of status quo economics. Rather, the valorization of independence and entrepreneurialism documented in self-branding literature was used by my participants not to embrace life as entrepreneurs within the enterprise, but to reject the enterprise in favor of freelance, consulting, or startup work cultures.

Indeed, much of this self-production of the neoliberal subject is pleasurable for the subject; it would not be so widespread if it wasn't. During the dot-com era, Michael Goldhaber gave a speech at a Harvard conference on digital economies in which he stated that "having attention means having recognition, identity, and meaning in the eyes of those around you. It provides sustenance to spirit, mind and body, in just about any form."⁶² The pleasure involved in pursuing self-branding strategies comes partially from having people pay attention: being read, getting @replies, and receiving conference invites have real affective benefits. Moreover, the exhilarating pursuit of self-realization is the new American Dream of independence from a boss or an office. The dot-com era's emphasis on creative workplaces, while partially a rhetorical and strategic move to justify long hours and low benefits, still created physical spaces and workers that differed from those that had come from the top-down management strategies of the 1960s. In the social media scene, working for any large company, even an "enlightened" one like Google, is lower status than self-employment; the ideal neoliberal subject is decoupled from multinational corporations. For many of my informants, the freelance lifestyle did create real satisfaction (and financial success), particularly when coupled with small business ownership.

It is a mistake to see a critique of self-branding as a value or moral judgment on capitalism overall.

Many contemporary critiques of neoliberalism stem from Marxist beliefs in the alienation inherent in industrial labor models. In this model, the worker is alienated from the products of her labor, and the work itself lacks a “sense of meaning.”⁶³ But according to Marxist traditions, what defines humanity is the “capacity for creative labor.”⁶⁴ Although the neoliberal, freelance model of the independent agent has its drawbacks—lack of job security, benefits, and stability—it provides many practitioners with a sense of agency and creativity. And even though the self-branding ideology oversells the ability for most people to engage in this type of work, it is a mistake to presume that it never provides self-actualization.

My informants were perhaps the people most positioned to find neoliberalism pleasurable. They—and others like them—have been championed by local governments as a solution to economic troubles and held up as role models. President Barack Obama tweeted, “This is a country that’s always been on the cutting edge—and the reason is that America’s always had the most daring entrepreneurs.” New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg has poured enormous resources into encouraging entrepreneurship to benefit the local economy. But self-branding gurus advocate techniques that are inapplicable to factory workers, people in service positions, or simply people without access to technical skills and sophisticated personal networks. While Ferriss, Schawbel, Roffer, and Vaynerchuk claim that their strategies can be used by anybody, they are deeply rooted in white-collar professional culture. At Allison’s personal branding seminar, I received the following card from a fashionably dressed woman:

Makeup with MICHELLE
Everybody has STAR Power!
Michelle E. Thompson
Design YOUR Best Face!!!
ALL over Town . . .

TV, Film, Print, Stage, Brides & Private.

www.michelleinthecity@tumblr.com: BLOG [~~@~~ crossed out]

www.makeupwithmichelle.biz

[~~e-mail address~~, crossed out]

Text: [~~phone number~~]

Michelle Thompson had clearly followed the instructions in personal branding books to the letter: she had a Tumblr blog (advocated by many self-branding gurus since it is free and simple to use), but had printed her URL and e-mail address incorrectly on her business cards. Thompson's attempt to use social media as she had been directed made her seem amateurish. At the same time that personal branding is posited as an economic solution, it shifts the burden of stability, financial success, and advancement to the worker. Anyone who fails to achieve these things can be blamed for not "wanting it enough" or not working hard. But self-branding entails considerable work. The strategy spills into all parts of life more than does a forty-hour-a-week job, due to the overwhelmingly frequent need for maintenance and monitoring. And the anxiety, distress, and uncertainty felt by many of my informants have not been reported in the self-branding literature.

The use of social media to create a branded self is an example of enterprise self-regulation, or a "technology of subjectivity."⁶⁵ While Web 2.0 ideology advocates self-branding as a way to find personal fulfillment and economic success, successfully creating an "edited self" means trying to bridge the inherent contradictions between one's real-life behavior and the more restrained behavior required by workplaces. In other words, it requires engaging in immaterial emotional labor to maintain a business-friendly self-presentation while feigning an "authentic" self. It is not productive to criticize self-branding's emphasis on commodification just because it feels distasteful. As Adam Arvidsson writes in the preface to his book *Brands*, "to be critical of brands per se is about as fruitful as it is to be critical of factories or bureaucracies."⁶⁶ The problem is that self-branding, as a practical technique, is limited and will only be successful for a

slim sliver of the population, yet it is being advocated as a universal solution to the economic downturn that can be adopted by anyone. Moreover, although my informants often found freelance project-based culture to be creatively fulfilling, they also were burdened by the stress of continuous self-monitoring—a burden that demonstrates the dissonance between neoliberal ideals and the reality of day-to-day life.