

PERSONAL BRANDING - A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION INSTRUMENT FOR FREELANCERS

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Abstract: *The paper presents the main findings regarding the role of personal branding as a strategic instrument for the development of small businesses, especially of those led by women, taking into account the growth of services sectors where women are managers or owners and also the development of female entrepreneurship within Europe and Romania. The main results show that, even though the role of small businesses is well known as an economic growth factor, and that women conduct mainly such businesses within service sectors, personal branding is far from being seen as a strategic instrument for business development.*

Key-words: *women, small business, freelancers, personal branding*

1. Introduction

Within an economy dominated by competition and extreme changes in technology and communication, every professional, small business owner, freelancer or even student has to create a good reputation and a management of professional presentation in order to achieve financial objectives and professional recognition.

According to all the scientific papers related to the topic of freelancers and women written in the last few years – very few we may say, the subject of personal branding is not one of interest for researchers, being seldom used by freelancers and small entrepreneurs. Even though there are many examples of great entrepreneurs that made a fortune out of their names, even women entrepreneurs, there are very few lessons learned from all of their journeys.

If we talk about the public interest regarding this topic, one may find over 182000 results, but as we refer to academic papers, there are only about 100. This shows that the subject is highly approached by professionals and rarely by researchers, even though there are many ways in which personal branding may help a business and a freelancer evolve and obtain greater financial results.

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Even more, unfortunately, the Romanian culture does not encourage women to speak about themselves and to advertise their work or their results. This results in a lack of confidence and a lack of financial results, even though many small (?) business owners and many freelancers do exceptional work.

Also, according to EU documents, when running a business, women face challenges related to limited access to finances, digitalisation, lack of networks and resources, limited access in reconciling business and family concerns.

All of these challenges are not barriers anymore if women, small business owners or freelancers, create a good reputation for themselves and for their business, the brand being a sign for the customer to trust that their products and services are worth of purchasing.

Thus, it is obvious that women's entrepreneurial activities have to be differently positioned on the market and have to be differently branded.

2. Personal branding

Kheder (2014) refers to personal branding as the process of establishing a unique personal identity, developing an active communication approach of one's brand identity to a specific target market and evaluating its impact on one's image and reputation, to fulfil personal and professional objectives (p. 33).

Also, Karsudjono, Christianta and Eliyana (2013) state that personal branding is defined as a personal perception or emotion about a person and mainly it represents a reflection of who one is, what one believes, what one does, and how one does it. It is an authentic process and image and therefore one may state that there is no competition since the main concern is on establishing a sincere focus on the value of uniqueness (p. 628).

Thomas (2011, 142–143) states that there are four critical building blocks needed to develop an image into a credible, top of mind personal brand representation of a person and their work. Those four building blocks are: the name of the brand, the message, specifically what the brand stands for, definite understanding of value, purpose and uniqueness, the channel, meaning multiple information channels to develop a value adding presence and the development of relationships of value, especially connections and partnerships.

Recent scientific papers are centred on personal branding seen as competence communicated properly that can be used as a strategic instrument for the financial success of a small company or a freelancer (Rangarajan et al., 2017). Also, Kucharska and Confente (2017) accomplished great work in overviewing the literature related to the subject of personal branding and also in highlighting the use of social-media in transforming personal branding into a strategic instrument. On the other hand, Grzesiak (2018) combines scientific and experiential work in the field of personal branding.

As some authors state (Amoako and Okpattah, 2018), personal branding may be used as a strategic instrument in sales, and especially by women entrepreneurs who develop an authentic personal image of their businesses or professions, as Thompson et al (2018) states.

3. Objectives and research

Studies conducted on this subject pointed out that Romanian female entrepreneurs and freelancers encountered the barriers of the role of women as mothers and also lack of access to networking. These are the main reasons for which personal branding is considered a strategic instrument in professional and business development, because a good reputation is a mechanism that attracts clients and it is the key to overcome such barriers.

The objectives of the study were to verify the hypothesis according to which there is a gap between the need to face the fierce competition through the personal branding construction process and the Romanian culture which suggests that one should be humble and also the hypothesis according to which small business women do not have specific knowledge on how to conduct such a process. The research was conducted between February 2019 and April 2018, on a number of 250 small business women and freelancers from Brasov, Alba Iulia, București, Cluj, Sibiu, and Făgăraș.

The study was based on a questionnaire comprising 15 questions regarding women entrepreneurs' access to information and knowledge about personal branding, about the process and also regarding their resistance to change in terms of adopting personal branding communication processes as strategic instruments for their business development, based on cultural factors.

The researcher chose only business women or freelancers from these four cities because of their role in developing communities of women entrepreneurs in each of the six cities mentioned above. There were also opened interviews with 1/3 of sample business women, with the purpose of finding out more about specific barriers, opinions, and views regarding personal branding.

4. Findings and discussions

The most important results show that the women entrepreneurs from the sample consider that there is a clear connection between their shyness and the lack of desire to be a public figure and the way that they were raised to be humble regarding their results or expertise.

More than 89% of the women are freelancers and 11% of them own a business, as shown in figure 1. From the sample, 52% are consultants (marketing, management, lawyers, accountants) 33% are communication specialists and 15% work in the beauty industry (cosmetics, photography).

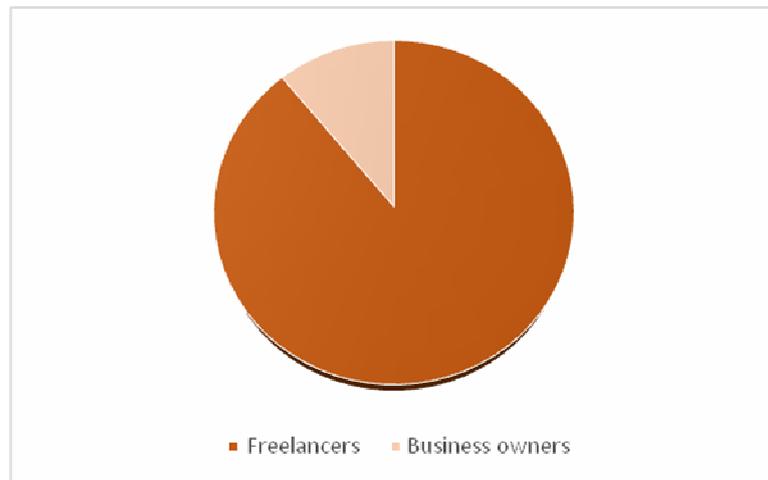


Fig. 1. *The sample of women entrepreneurs of the study*

Most of the women entrepreneurs (90%) consider that there is a strong connection between education and the desire or openness to become a public figure. Also, most of them (87%) think that there is a strong connection between the education received at home and the desire to expose professional results and/or original work, as shown in Figure 2.

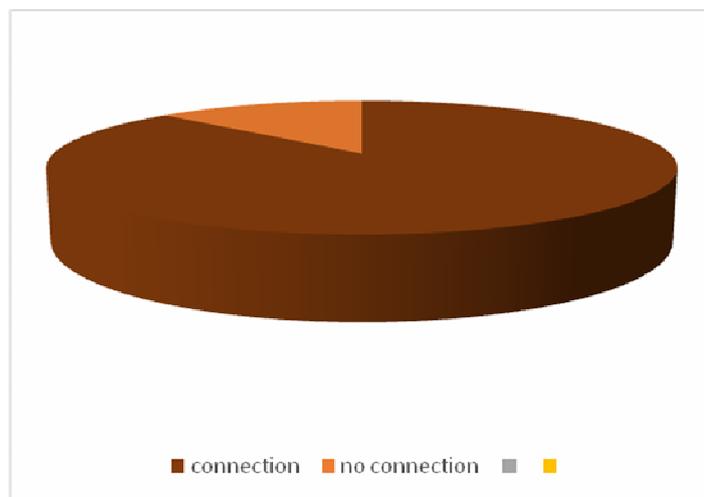


Fig. 2. *Women entrepreneurs education and country culture*

Most of the women entrepreneurs who were interviewed (85%) want to become known for their expertise, without being familiar with the process. Moreover, most of them (94%) have heard about the concept, but do not know the exact meaning, as shown in Figure 3.

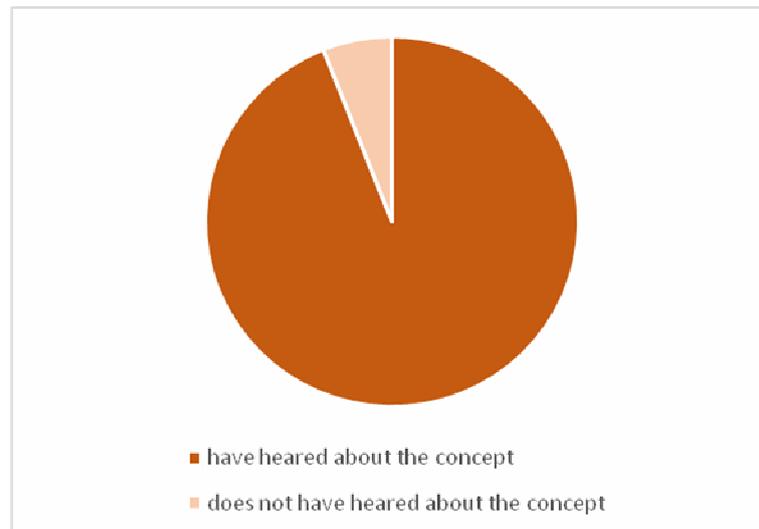


Fig.3. *The percentage of business women that have heard about the concept but do not know its exact meaning*

Most of them though (83%) think that there are better ways to overcome barriers than personal branding, very few (18%) would be willing to start the brand construction process with an expert within the next year, and even fewer (10%) think that personal branding is a strategic instrument for achieving financial goals.

86% of the women entrepreneurs think that the first step in creating an authentic image is to have a logo – which is the most frequent mistake related to branding. Also, 45% of the women entrepreneurs think that mass media is not a proper environment for business and professional exposure, but 99% think that social media – Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn – are the most important channels to communicate messages related to personal brand.

5. Conclusions

Within an economy dominated by competition, personal branding is the most important instrument that can help you be perceived as unique and to become, for financial sake, the top of mind business or professional when it comes to your field of expertise.

Many women, according to this study, consider that there is no general recipe for personal branding and that there is no sure strategic instrument for the financial success of small businesses and freelancing activities.

Even though there are many results indicating interest in the subject of personal branding within the whole world, there are very few scientific research papers meant to educate professional and small business owners to conduct the process of personal brand construction in terms of name, message, uniqueness, value, and network connections.

The authentic image and an honest personal branding process has to be built on insight, truth, and reality and is an incremental process throughout life. The study has its limits in terms of methodological design.

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