PERSONALITY PR
as a socio-cultural phenomenon

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Key words: Personalization, Individualization, Globalization, Popular Culture, Personal Branding, Personal Marketing, Personal Public Relations, Personal Coaching, Positioning of Individuals, CEO Positioning, Reputation Management, Impression Management

Abstract

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This paper starts off by giving an overview of the personality market. It discusses personality PR as a socio-cultural phenomenon against the background of a neo-liberal model of business, pointing out the most important reasons for the growing significance – and negative image – of self-marketing. A brief review of the rapidly growing book market on the topics of promoting, marketing and branding yourself is used to illustrate the theoretical background and practical approaches of some of the authors. Finally, the point is made that personality PR or personal communication management is a responsible management task and consultants/coaches must acquire additional knowledge alongside sound experience in their field of corporate communication/PR.

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Zitierweise/Quellenangabe:
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1. THE PERSONALITY MARKET IS BOOMING

Personal public relations is becoming an important economic factor in the PR business, above all in connection with the *marketing* of individuals (personality or celebrity marketing), and has developed into an independent discipline. In *High Visibility. The Making and Marketing of Professionals into Celebrities*, Kotler et al. analysed the US market for celebrities and attributed PR with the most dominant role of all communication disciplines: "the most essential support for most aspirants comes from public relations" (cf. Rein/Kotler/Stoller 1997:268).

Our first studies for the *personal communication management* research project\(^1\) revealed that the market is also booming in Europe: more and more PR agencies and PR consultants accompany politicians, businessmen and women, scientists, artists and sports professionals, as well as individuals from showbiz, the fashion and TV worlds as they become public figures. In doing so, they offer their clients personal coaching (alongside classic PR activities), including interview and presentation techniques, preparation for public appearances and press conferences, image and brand creation, colour and style consultations. People in management positions – particularly CEOs – are also becoming more important for corporate communication. In stark contrast with the American market, however, hardly anybody ever talks about this type of consultancy work in Europe, preferring to see it as an *undercover activity* which is carried out confidentially and very discretely. Nonetheless, personalization is seen as a key factor for successful PR/organizational communication and is unlikely to disappear from the everyday work of agencies and consultants.

\(^1\) The 'Personal Communication Management' (PCM) research project, including a focus on continuing education, was initiated by the author of this paper at the University of Klagenfurt in 2003. The many different ways in which individuals present themselves have since been investigated in a number of seminar papers and diploma dissertations. The university course on PCM was first held in the academic year 2005/2006. So far it is the only university-based continuing education course which deals with the positioning of individuals, providing both a solid theoretical foundation and practice-oriented work.
2. PERSONALIZATION AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL PHENOMENON

The phenomenon of personalization and the various ways in which individuals present themselves go back to the very dawn of humanity. People have always used a rich repertoire of techniques, either consciously or unconsciously, so as to leave a lasting (positive) impression on others (cf. Nessmann 2000/2004, Rosenfeld 2002). The neoliberal model of business and society has accelerated the personalization factor and associated phenomena of how individuals present themselves. In the western industrialized world, the trend over the last few decades (particularly from the 1980s onwards) has clearly been towards individualization. Values such as self-realization, self-fulfilment and self-satisfaction are playing an ever more important role. Happiness, pleasure and enjoyment of life are the new merits which are increasingly observed in members of today's so-called affluent society. People expect a lot more from life; they want to live their own lives, be fulfilled, find their own personal style and be unmistakeable and unique. Personality and individuality are becoming increasingly important values.

The "motor of individualization" is running at full speed (cf. Beck/Beck-Gernsheim 1994); the "battle for recognition" is becoming tougher (cf. Franck 1998); the "magic force of attention" is gaining a new dimension (cf. Tarr-Krüger 2001). More specifically, the requirements of the labour market have changed (cf. Bridges 1994): more and more people are chasing after fewer and fewer jobs. Competition amongst job seekers is increasing and the selection procedures are becoming tougher. Modern-day capitalism, compounded by the negative excesses of globalization, needs "flexible people" (cf. Sennet 2000) who have to constantly promote, assert and position themselves anew. Not only freelancers find themselves in such a situation; even employees and those in management positions (CEOs) are affected.

The media are another driving force behind personalization phenomena. Prominent personalities from the worlds of politics, business, culture and sport, etc. are very newsworthy. The more an event is endowed with a personal factor, i.e. deals with the actions or fate of individuals, the more chance it has of becoming a news item. It is noticeable that personalization in the media has become increasingly important over the
last few years and the media are focusing more on individuals in their reports (cf. Park/Berger 2004, Eisenegger/Imhof 2004, Zerfass/Sandhu 2006). Nowadays almost all print media have sections dealing exclusively with Society, People, VIPs, Celebrities – and not only the tabloids, but also quality newspapers and business magazines. Tendencies towards personalization in the media have gone so far as to encourage the creation of special TV and newspaper formats which just report on so-called Celebs. The editors and journalists are known as society reporters. The gossip press is booming and business with vanity is thriving.

Of course, companies have not escaped these developments either. Personalization is becoming a key factor – for one-person businesses, small and medium-sized enterprises and large listed companies alike. It is becoming essential to open up companies and their management to the public eye and to increase their transparency. The stakeholders' interest is growing in what type of person the boss is and media reports focus ever more strongly on the individuals who run a company. Against this background, CEO communication or CEO positioning is growing in importance. Communication management for individuals, or personal communication management, is turning into an indispensable component of organizational and corporate communications/PR. And it is against the background of a neo-liberal model of business that personality PR and counselling has become a money-making enterprise. Agencies and consultants are systematically encouraging organizations and their upper echelons (CEOs in particular) to work on their public image. This factor is another very important driving force behind the dynamics of personalization.

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3. PROMOTING YOURSELF is generally seen negatively

The concepts of promoting, marketing or branding yourself (and particularly the German equivalents Ich-Marke, Mensch als Marke, Ich-AG, Ich-Aktie etc.) are treated with great scepticism by many. In the seminars I have been holding on personality PR at the University of Klagenfurt (Austria) since 1999, the same, mostly negative, associations are named time and again: prostitution, superficiality, manipulation, a pack of lies, a sell-out, bragging, snobbishness, egotism, vanity, etc. etc. and the type of people frequently mentioned in this context are schemers, bootlickers, pushy people, fakes, ego-trippers who like showing off or pushing in in front of others, people who get their own way or cheat, etc. etc.

Surveys and the seminars reveal the common belief that self-marketing is only for people who want to conceal their weaknesses with the help of cheap marketing tricks or who want to attract the attention of the media. Actually, it is performance which counts most and 'people get to hear about that', they argue.

Self-marketing has negative connotations and the reasons for people's scepticism are many and varied. One is surely to do with the fact that it is associated with selling (out) one's soul (personality), as illustrated by the rapidly growing number of VIPs (mostly in politics and show business) who would do almost anything to get into the media. The names of certain individuals are almost invariably mentioned in this context (e.g. Paris Hilton and co).

Over the last few years, so many 'how-to' books have been published, providing tips on promoting, marketing or branding yourself and dealing with a wide range of concepts connected with the marketing of individuals, that it is almost impossible to gain an overview. Not only are there numerous books, there are also numerous terms: a review of the literature showed that there was very little agreement across German-language

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3 In German, people are literally said to be brands (Ich-Marke/Mensch als Marke = me as the brand), companies (Ich-AG = Me PLC), or shares (Ich-Aktie).
and some English publications (cf. Nessmann 2002/2003). Since that first review, the number of books has increased still further. The quality of these works differs: quite a few of them give advice in the 'how-to' format, although some are partially based on solid theoretical foundations. Furthermore, depending on their professional background, the authors approach the topic either from a marketing, branding or a PR perspective. A more detailed analysis would go beyond the scope of this paper but there is enough space for a brief digression.

3.1 Communication counselling models

The branding or marketing model follows the 'people as brands' approach, taking advantage of the findings of modern brand management and marketing. Advocates of this model work with the umbrella terms of personal branding/personal marketing and generally follow the 4 Ps when drawing up their concepts, namely product: services, proposals, individual qualities; price: the conditions under which the person is prepared to offer their services (fees, salary); place: where the person offers their 'products' or services; and promotion: communication tools like advertising, sponsoring, testimonials, public relations, etc., whereby public relations is ascribed a significant role.

The reputation model also exploits the findings of modern brand management and recognizes 'people' as 'brands'. Representatives of this model use the term reputation management, thus avoiding the concept of 'image'. Attempts to distinguish between the definitions 'reputation' and 'image' are not particularly convincing from a theoretical standpoint although the ways in which the authors propose building up the reputation of a brand/person certainly do differ. The cornerstones of the reputation management model are predictability, calculability and sustainability, as well as orientation towards

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5 The relevant references for these models can be found in the bibliography by looking for the words 'branding', 'reputation' and 'PR', etc.
the stakeholders (investors, analysts, clients, employees, etc.) coupled with potential support for the company or the person which arises from this.

The *public relations model* can be seen as a further development of the reputation and brand-oriented model. It also takes account of the values attributed to the individual or company, of the relevant stakeholders and the sustainability of the measure. In this context, PR is not to be understood as mere media work or as just one element of the marketing mix but as an independent communication discipline. Within the framework of organizational communication, PR is an indispensable function of management. In terms of its individual planning stages, however, the PR model is much more complex and systematic than the models described above as it follows the individual stages of classic PR: analysis, strategies, tactics and evaluation. In contrast to the marketing and reputation models, which are more inspired by economic factors, the PR model is firmly anchored in communication. The person-oriented view of public relations should be seen as complementing previous public relations theories which have either reflected PR from an organizational perspective or prefer to focus on society. As an example: while organization-oriented PR approaches ask what contribution public relations makes to achieving the organization's goals, the central question in person-oriented PR is what contribution public relations can make to achieving both: personal *and* organization-oriented goals. Here, cultural, social and economic aspects are taken into account.

In her 1999 exploratory study, Motion came to similar conclusions, identifying various counselling models in the course of her interviews. She questioned PR professionals in New Zealand who also had politicians among their clients and identified two approaches: a *formative* and an *advisory* one: "the formative mode is an active constitution of a public identity, whereas the advisory mode is a communication counseling approach" (1999:465). While the formative role reflects the marketing techniques of promotion and selling, the advisory role is based more on the PR roles of communication counselling and building up a relationship. Her study illustrates the breadth and variety of personal PR: the spectrum ranges from classic marketing.
techniques and traditional communication approaches to methods of developing identity.

3.2 Socio-critical questions

Let us now return to the analysis of the literature: mostly, the authors' approach is to fall back on various schools of thought and theoretical disciplines (e.g. pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, impression management), often without actually mentioning them by name. Almost all of these authors give instructions on how to identify one's personal potential (strengths, values, visions, goals, desires, etc.), how to find one's Unique Selling Proposition (USP) and how to leave a lasting impression on others. Most start from the assumption that people can be turned into a brand, in other words that the characteristics of product branding also apply to people.

One thing that really sticks out in these 'how-to' books, whether scientifically grounded or not, is the way that the language is strongly business oriented. They talk about the individual as a company, or the individual as a product who is 're-packaged' as something to be sold. Manage yourself as you would manage a successful business is the creed some authors preach. The concept of the market has become the dominant metaphor. To a certain extent, individuals are degraded to purely economic units and socially critical questions are usually ignored. The many how-to books and courses on self-marketing which often deal with this contradictory topic in a one-sided, yet catchy way have their own contribution to make to this negative image. Against this background it is hardly surprising that the topics of promoting/marketing/branding yourself – at least in Europe – generate a lot of scepticism in many people.

Neo-liberal reasoning raises questions which are the very essence of a socially critical stance, such as:

What happens to the people whose market value (in allusion to 'Me PLC') falls or never really ever rises? What about those who fail to come to terms with the laws of the market? What does the desire to be seen as a 'brand' actually imply? What effects does it have on how one's personality develops and on one's social contacts? What image of a person is propagated as a result? What effects do these tendencies towards individualization have on society as a whole?
To date, there have been very few satisfactory answers to these questions. Academia may have described individualization (cf., e.g., Beck, 1994), mobilization and increased flexibility (cf., e.g., Sennet, 2000) in quite some detail, pointing out the social effects, contradictions and risks which these phenomena entail, but the question as to the status accorded to self-marketing has hardly been dealt with at all. A satisfactory process of reflection is yet to emerge.

Is it possible to avoid the omnipresent self-management principles? Can individuals survive in present-day society without resorting to self-management techniques? What can they do when they are no good at 'selling themselves'? What does personal PR mean for the individual personally? To what extent is it socially legitimate to employ self-marketing processes? How can the ambivalent relationship between individual and society be described in this context?

3.3 Can we survive without personal PR?

Authors who have taken a critical look at the relationship between individuals and society have so far failed to answer these questions. The general tenor in publications dealing with the question 'In what type of society are we living, actually?' is that there are no binding answers, just varying viewpoints and positions.

This paper started out by assuming that people have always employed a wide range of impression management techniques in order to create a lasting (mostly positive) impression of themselves. Indeed, this phenomenon has been paid ample attention by psychologists and sociologists. The forms of expression range from pro-active self-marketeers 'desperate' for publicity who would do almost anything to stand out, to defensive, reserved individuals who would prefer to keep a very low profile. It is true to say, however, that everybody wants to be liked and to be loved and from earliest childhood, we develop our own repertoire of attention-grabbing 'tricks', both consciously and unconsciously.

Quality and competence are important and indispensable characteristics if we want to get on well in life, in our partnerships, families and professions. The relevant questions in the context of self-management are:
What can or should I do so that other people take note of my qualities? How do I want people to perceive me? What do I consider important and how can I show that to my best advantage? How can I be seen, regarded and respected by people who are important to me? What tools do I have at my disposal and which of them suit me and my identity?

How individuals generally feel about personality PR activities depends very much on whether they have managed to critically examine all of the questions posed here and whether a positive, meaningful picture of personality PR can be drawn up which serves to reinforce its identity. Socialization factors (upbringing, environment, childhood experiences, etc.) also play a role, for example the extent to which an individual's upbringing and their cultural environment allow them to push themselves to the forefront or to step into the limelight, etc. and how important this is for the individual. As our seminars show, people have very emotionally charged reactions to this topic and it is necessary to discuss and challenge the moral concepts and preconceptions behind them. It is also a question of 'unlearning' what has been learnt so that personality PR can be approached with an unencumbered mind.

4. PERSONALITY PR IS A RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT TASK

The values propagated by my understanding of personality PR kick in at that very point. Personality PR should be based on the values, talents, experiences, strengths and weaknesses (!) which the client already has. It is not a question of 'cheap tricks', 'brash attention-grabbing' and 'minor stardom'; rather it is about individuals getting their personal 'mission statement' (values, goals, visions) across, cultivating relationships and contacts, building up personal and professional networks, making use of opportunities to communicate, drawing attention to themselves and to their achievements, gaining trust, to mention just a few points (cf. Nessmann, 2005). The most important thing is to be seen as being honest, authentic and credible.

Personality PR or personal communication management (PCM) can be seen as a special form of professionally organized communication (i.e. systematically planned, continually carried out and properly evaluated) by and for individuals in all areas of society. The overriding aim is to successfully position individuals and, to a certain extent, the companies they work for, in the public eye. PCM does not only focus on CEOs as role models but also, in a broader sense, on positioning 'major' and 'minor'
celebrities in society, such as politicians, artists and sports professionals, but also freelance professionals (lawyers, doctors, life coaches, education counsellors, management and business consultants, therapists, etc). Many of them are also members of organizations or networked within (trade) associations and subject to the social conditions of competition.

**PCM as a form of coaching or counselling** places special emphasis on individuals and their characters (values, strengths and weaknesses) and positions them in the most important markets (i.e. capital, sales, labour markets or public opinion). PCM consultants/coaches (or personality consultants/coaches) help their clients to achieve the following:

- to recognize their personal potential (strengths, weaknesses, values, visions)
- to leave a lasting impression on groups which are relevant for them, both internally and externally (impression management)
- to create a positive reputation (reputation management)
- to position themselves as a 'brand' in the public eye (personal branding).

If PCM is to be carried out professionally, it should be done so consciously, systematically and continually. The clients' communicative appearances should be planned strategically. In the course of the personal communication management project at the University of Klagenfurt, an ideal concept was developed for clients in politics, business, culture, sport and education, etc. (cf. Nessmann 2005) which has since been modified and adapted (cf. Nessmann 2007, 2008). The main phases are:

1.) a briefing session to clarify the client's problem(s), viewpoints and goals
2.) taking stock (image, reputation, how well known, etc.)
3.) analysing all the data which has been collected (personal image, image as perceived by others; comparison of target and actual results, etc.),
4.) a clear strategy (goals, target groups, messages and guidelines),
5.) the tactics phase (selecting appropriate PR measures, instruments),
6.) evaluation (monitoring success and effectiveness, reflection).

It is not possible to describe the individual steps in more detail in this paper, but I would like to briefly introduce the most important PR measures and instruments in the tactics phase.
• **Documentation of personal data:** curriculum vitae with the most important personal facts and figures, photo archive, a personal 'branding dossier' (covering strengths, weaknesses, preferences, visions, goals, values, mission statement and other questions which journalists typically like to ask)

• **Impression Management:** strategies and tactics on how to present oneself, conscious use of language, clothing, symbols. Dealing with other people (esteem, recognition, praise, constructive criticism, politeness, respect, etc.)

• **Media and topic management:** press releases, press conferences, in-depth interviews with journalists, letters to the editor, guest commentaries, interviews, home stories, homepage, blogs, business cards, postcards, publications (books, articles, autobiography, etc.)

• **Social management:** taking on social responsibility, getting involved in associations, clubs and interest groups, supporting charitable or social institutions, taking part in public debates, holding seminars or lectures, attending and hosting parties, regularly cultivating contacts and relationships, networking, etc. etc.

When putting these tactics into effect, certain fundamental principles have to be observed. All these activities are only credible when they are honestly intended and not at variance with the client's character, values or personal convictions. Trust, credibility and authenticity arise when statements, actions and values coincide. In other words, individuals appear to be authentic, trustworthy and credible when their deeds (actions) are consistent with their words (statements) and values (ethical and moral principles).

Personality PR concepts cannot be bought off the peg but are always tailor-made. Everybody is an individual and therefore every PR/communication concept is different. As a result, personality consultants/coaches have to be very cautious and take account of individuals and their unique environment.

From the perspective of organizational communication, personality communication is a responsible management task and the chances and dangers of its strategies must be carefully considered. In terms of 'integrated communication', managers' public appearances must harmonize with the organization's other communicative efforts; the corporate brand and personal brand must be coordinated. Personalization must not turn into an end in itself (ego marketing by vain managers) but must be in the company's service. The individuals' actions must harmonize with their statements and values.

PR and communication consultants interested in personal communication management must acquire additional knowledge from the fields of coaching, branding, reputation
management and impression management alongside sound experience in their field of corporate communication. It is particularly important to comply with ethical and moral principles, as laid down in PR codices, for there is quite a lot at stake: trust, understanding, acceptance, credibility, integrity and – last but not least – the reputation of the individual (and the company).

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