

## Career Advice: You Are the Brand

Leaders who are out of work face a period of great uncertainty. Many use this time to reflect and rethink their next career move in order to take control of their own destiny. They want to happen to their career, not let their career happen to them. The first step in writing this next chapter is to define your brand. Here are some ways to get started.

### Craft a clear personal vision

The only way to gain control of your destiny is to have choices. Choices allow you to make trade-offs. Every job will be imperfect. But it is difficult to make choices, much less courageous choices, absent a clear personal vision for where you want to go.

As a colleague shared, “Make sure you are really clear on what your criteria are for your career move. One of the great lessons I learned in my own marketing career was to give your creative director the freedom of a tight brief.” A clear understanding of your vision provides the freedom to explore alternative paths.

There is a good bit of research that can be performed as you think through your vision. The perennial favorite [What Color Is Your Parachute?](#) by Richard N. Bolles is a practical read. We would also recommend *The 5 Patterns of Extraordinary Careers* by our colleague, Jim Citrin, and Rick Smith.

This is also a good time in the process for you to collect perspectives from valued mentors and friends. Reach out to supportive, truth-telling friends who know you well and will explore with you where you have been, where you are and where you can go.

Your vision should be bigger than a stated goal of becoming a CEO, CMO or head of sales. A vision encompasses your professional and personal life. We have worked with a lot of people over the years and have seen vision statements in all forms. Consider yourself as a brand with a position statement, a strategic plan and key message for becoming what it is that you hope and believe you can be.



One question a colleague consistently asks candidates could be helpful to consider:

*“How do you think about your brand? Brands evolve. You do, too. Send us signals of what you want to explore beyond your current path.”*

## Inventory and principles

Having crafted your vision, you now need to gauge where you are in the journey and catalogue those things that matter most. There are a couple of exercises that may help you get started.

### Inventory

Write or type out a four-column sheet. In the first column, list each and every job role you have had. The heading for the second column reads: What was my most significant contribution or impact? Now walk through every role and think about your biggest contribution in that role. Be specific. What did you do, how did you do it and what were the results?

The third column header reads: What did I learn? At each step in your career you have learned different things. You are collecting experiences, building capabilities and attaining levels of mastery as you navigate your career. What you learned can also include relationships that you value and have learned from, as well as behaviors you have observed and adopted.

The fourth column heading reads: The environment — what fed or starved me? Here you want to list the elements of the culture that you thrived in, as well as those environments that frustrated you.

You now have an inventory of the many tools you have in your toolbox. You now need to catalogue what tools — experiences, capabilities, academic, behavioral — that you need to collect to achieve your vision. Because wherever you go next, you want to either fill in those gaps, or see a navigable path to filling the gaps over time.

### Principles

The next bit of homework is listing your life principles. For example, there are industries and ownership constructs that are polarizing, compensation expectations that may be out of sync, or important family considerations that have to be dealt with. Geography is certainly in this calculus. It is fair to say that these decisions became more difficult post the Great Recession, and the COVID-19 era further complicated matters considerably.

What kind of company do you want to work for, and perhaps even importantly, what kind of company would you not work for? What is your risk tolerance? Will you make a lateral move to gain specific experiences? Will you put more compensation at risk and migrate into private equity? Are you open to relocation? Are you and your family aligned? These kinds of question all need to be contemplated early in the process rather than later. These principles are the filters through which you are going to screen opportunities that present themselves, and you need to be clear with the recruiter from the outset about why they matter and how they help you achieve your vision.

## Your copy

Your copy, or message, is your resume and online presence. You must get your resume right. This is your story and it is critical that it's the absolute best reflection of you.

## Resume

There are a lot of points of view about resumes. Length, format, graphics, hyperlinks, etc.

*“Resume writer? Save your money. Don't jazz it up. Make it easy to read. No fluff.”*

*“Give me the results and dates. Explain, don't hide.”*

We simply stress the importance of adhering to the basics:

- » **Summary** — A succinct overview and a reflection of your experiences and corporate history, as well as what you think makes you successful. It is the one place on the resume to communicate who you are; everything else that follows is a record of what you have done.
- » **Job description** — Answers the simple question: What are they paying me to do? It should answer the who, what, how many, where, when and why. Numbers matter. Recruiters are looking for size, scale, scope and specificity. The more recent the role, the more depth in the description, communicating the heightened relevancy of the role.
- » **Accomplishments** — If the job description covers what you were accountable for, the bullets reflect your contributions. This section answers: What did I do over and above what they were paying me to do? Contributions and impact have hard numbers attached to them. At the end of each bullet, ask yourself the question “So what?” If you cannot come up with a number, dollar amount, percentage, index, etc. then it most likely is a core responsibility — something that you were expected to do — and it belongs up in the job description.

Write with where you are going in mind, not where you are. If you want to be a GM, write like one. Your metrics are broad and financial, not simply revenue and market share.



Use simple, declarative language. If you were given a title that only means something to someone within your company, explain what it is simply. Do not use acronyms that are only understood within your company, nor abbreviations that are not commonly understood.

And as a colleague shared:

*“If you present yourself as a legacy manager, you are way behind. How does your work reflect what is needed today? You have to project the leadership traits that are relevant to the challenges ahead — crisis management, tech savvy, empathy and change-readiness.”*

## LinkedIn

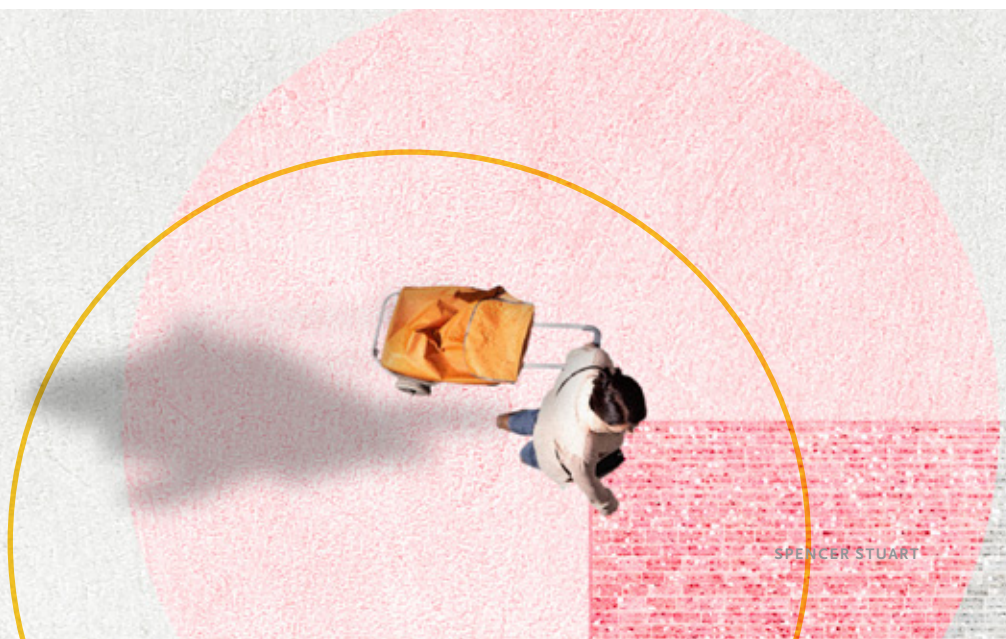
*“Your LinkedIn profile ... that’s where I want to see the ‘pop.’ I’m already online, all ready to click and dive. It is an expectation of my LinkedIn experience.”*

*“Often, your target hiring executives will see your LinkedIn profile well before they see your resume. It better sing.”*

Our colleague Jim Citrin has great advice regarding LinkedIn, stemming from his work in writing [The Career Playbook](#). As it relates to writing your profile, you can find in-depth perspective published in this [Harvard Business Review](#) article. It includes thoughtful advice around how to focus your headline, tell a compelling story and tailor your experiences. It also offers guidance about how to think about recommendations, as well as utilizing images and media samples to draw attention to your accomplishments.

We also like what Sandra Long, author of [LinkedIn for Personal Branding: The Ultimate Guide](#), has to say. She advises corporations, institutions and individuals on how to optimize and bring their brand to life on the channel. Her premise for job seekers is that “the most likely path to employment is through an employee referral. Your referral lives in your network, and a great profile will motivate the reader to take the next step. You must have a proactive strategy. Connecting drives traffic to your profile, and your profile can lead to referrals. And the secret to LinkedIn is leveraging and contributing to your online community.”

Lastly, your resume and LinkedIn profiles are living and breathing documents. We would encourage you to regularly update them as good “career hygiene,” as it will be easier to capture and document high-impact roles and accomplishments when they are fresh.



## Spread your message

OK, we have done a ton of work and have yet to send out a resume or make a call. Good. We are ready to launch your campaign.

You need to blanket the market. The broader the reach, the better the odds that your message will get through to opportunities that will help you attain your goal.

As a senior executive, the odds are an executive recruiter will be involved in your process. So we are a primary target audience. You need to cover the executive search firms that serve your sector/function/industry. Sure, you only go into their system once, but this is a bit of a top-of-mind, prod and engage business. If you are able to communicate directly with a recruiter, you are guaranteed to be top of mind at least for that moment. There is no guarantee if you simply go into their system. So, do you go to the website and log in your paperwork, or go directly to the recruiter? You do both.

Your next target audience are your target companies. Do your research and email the top leaders and whoever heads talent. The best executives will tell you that bringing talent into the company is the most important part of their week. As a distinguished colleague shared:

*“Visit a store. Walk the aisles. Drive down a main drag. Take note of who you admire and why.”*

## Networking

*“Leverage your network. Now is the time to use it. Assuming you have earned it, now is the time to draw upon those relationships.”*

We've discussed and shared with you some smart resources to help you with LinkedIn. And this is the best stage to connect with your networks. Your message is out, and now it is time for some grassroots marketing. You want your networking to be productive and with purpose. Calling old friends may be fun in the early stages, but absent a clear objective/purpose such as gaining support so they advocate for you, it is a time hog and can distract you from your game plan.

And understand that when you call an old friend or colleague, they are going to try to help. Some will be more help than others, but everyone wants to help. The power of networking is creating buzz about you in lots of different hallways. By definition, your audience is narrow (recruiters, HR/talent management, board members and executives). Your network is your community and it is expansive. It can comprise former colleagues, consultants, advisers, board members, bankers, agents, lawyers, neighbors and family. Aim to have your community's collective wind at your back.

## Interviewing

You are going to experience many types of interviews. However, as you prepare either for an exploratory discussion or a discussion about an available opportunity, here are some important basics to remember:

- » **Do your homework and prepare your questions.** The quality of your questions are as important as your answers.
- » **Learn as much as you can while sharing the authentic you.** You and your interviewer are each getting a feel for chemistry, and you want to learn as much as you possibly can about each other, the role, the company, the challenges, etc. You have one objective that the interviewer does not share: You want to get the order. Lean into the discussion. Let it be you who decides to keep going with the process. Do not leave it up to them.
- » **Stage your background simply for virtual interviews.** Curtains drawn; glare diminished. Personalized, but not polarizing. Invest in a desk lamp that extends to a height that can project light at an angle from slightly above you on to your face so that you are well lit and there are no reflections off eyeglasses in the camera lens. Figure out how to get the camera at eye level, or slightly above your head angled down. Banish the upward shot from your desk. Use the best quality sound device (headsets are fine). Set the camera in the middle of your screen. If you are using a tablet or phone, use the vertical setting so you are looking into the camera, as opposed to when the camera favors the right or left in a horizontal setting. In that setting, look into the camera lens on either side, not at the center of your screen. (More on the art of video interviewing [here](#)).

- » **Be concise and precise with your answers.** Keep it tight, but back it up. Questions should be answered as they should have been asked: Here is the context, here is what we did and how we went about it, and here were the results. As one partner shared, “Two observations I’ve made over time are that candidates tend to ramble too much and/or they do not offer enough granularity when answering the question.” Be specific and focused. If they do 65 percent of the talking and you do 35 percent, it is likely a very good interview. If it is 50/50 that is fine; it is the kind of discourse you are hoping for. If you do 65 percent of the talking, well, see the earlier point about rambling.
- » **Be ready for the tough questions.** There will be two questions that usually present themselves that you need to be very well prepared for with no hesitation: why you made a particular career move and why this role and company would make sense for you at this point in your career.
- » **Sustain your energy level and engagement.** Interviewing well is an art. High-performing artists rehearse exhaustively, and so should you. Practicing and testing your style and presentation with people who will give you feedback will help you feel more confident overall and more effective in dealing tough questions.
- » **Dress crisply and professionally.** If your interview is taking place virtually, do not wear distracting or pixilating patterns.



This process is an emotional one. You are balancing lots of influences: personal loyalties, ambition, family concerns, fear/ excitement and, of course, financial considerations. To the extent that you can bring some science and a set of disciplines to the process, the smarter you will be, and the easier it will be to identify and understand that those tugs and pulls are a normal part of the process. Applying these best practices can help you navigate what can often be a trying time — and help you build a brand that reflects your vision in the process.





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