

HIRING

How to Curate Your Digital Persona

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July 03, 2020 **UPDATED** July 09, 2020

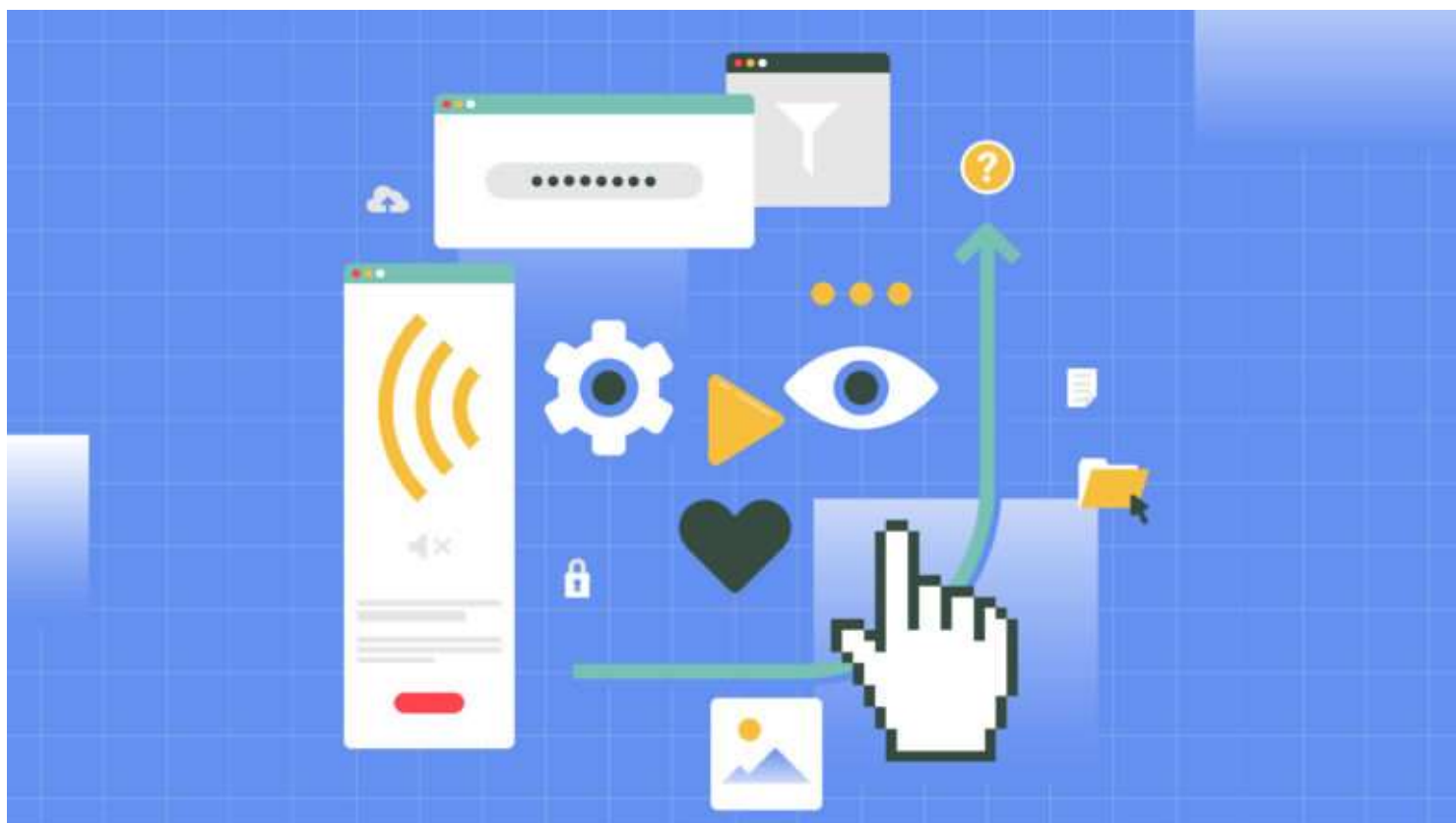


Illustration by Daniel Creel

“Who am I, really?”

Philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists – not to mention poets and artists – have been trying to answer this question for centuries. The good news for business leaders is that they don’t need to turn into armchair psychotherapists, or get an advanced degree in metaphysics, to figure it out. Nor do average employees need to dig deep into their unconscious, or unleash their inner Freud.

In the business world, there is a far simpler way of working out who we are, at least when it comes to our professional personas: just pay attention to how others see us.

Social science research says that who we are at work is predominantly defined by what other people think of us: how they measure the success of our behaviors and actions, how they perceive our characters and motivations, and how they compare us to others. Whether we get informal advice from our peers, or partake in formal assessment-related exercises, there is no better way to pinpoint who we are at work than to crowdsource evaluations of our reputations and personal “brands.”

Academic research indicates that people with high functioning and accurate self-perceptions incorporate other people’s opinions into their sense of self. This may run counter to popular advice, but the ability to present ourselves in strategic and politically astute ways is indeed critical to succeeding in any professional context. Those who live by the mantra “*don’t worry too much about what other people think of you*” may hinder their own career advancement. As academic reviews have highlighted, successful people (with the notable exception of Joan Jett) worry a lot about their reputations, and they care deeply about portraying themselves in a socially desirable way.

When we enjoy the luxury of convening with colleagues and clients in person (remember that location called “the office”?) others gain impressions of us based on our physical presence in a three-dimensional space, including how firm our handshakes are and how our voices sound in the acoustics of the room. Even our scents convey important social information to others. In those settings, we don’t have the opportunity to see ourselves exactly as others see us, and our feedback is only as good as the signals they convey (a smile, a yawn, more or less eye contact), or what they tell us directly.

Now that so much of our communication takes place on-line, however, we have all become our own “avatars” and have access to much (if not most) of the same information that others do. The mountain of data each of us produces on the internet is the raw material used to fuel the artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms that track our digital “footprints.” It’s also what other people — and organizations — use to make quick judgments about our personal and professional attributes, particularly when they are deciding whether to recruit us, hire us, invest in our startups, collaborate with us, or compete with us.

Even if our social media accounts are private, there is likely ample public information that any person determined to assess us can access. Consider how easily corporations use our digital personas to evaluate us, ascertain our preferences, “profile” us based on demographics, and sell us things. We can be sure that recruiters, investors, peers, and competitors are also using the same data to generate and test hypotheses about who we are, what we care about, and our odds of success in different scenarios.

But we have options. While people and corporations are busy using our data to influence and judge us, we have the ability to curate our avatars in a way that will influence *them*. Understanding how our online profiles get created and used by others — as well as how we can access and modify them — is part of building a successful career.

No matter what your goals may be, you should become aware of the story your public data tells — and understand how to change it.

Understanding the Algorithm

A common myth is that algorithms are impossible to fool or trick. But their capacity for error is more human than many think: AI identifies signals and patterns, trying to make sense of them, just like people do, but they do it in a more rigid, prescriptive, and formulaic way. If you understand the formula, you can curate the image you want others to see. Just as changing a few pixels can make AI believe that a picture of cat is actually a bowl of guacamole, so too can minor changes in your online presence lead to very different conclusions being drawn about you.

Here are some of the “public” building blocks you can use to enhance your online presence.

Photographs: People tend to think facial-recognition AI is “creepy,” but the truth is that flesh-and-blood people bring their own powerful biases — conscious or unconscious — to their judgments about your physical appearance, including basic attributes such as gender, age, and ethnicity.

Some things are beyond your control, but there are many aspects of your appearance that you can manage. You can either change your actual appearance (consult a stylist or fashionista friend to help you refine your look), or you can invest in software that allows you to modify a picture once it has been taken. Another approach is to use tools like “Zoom touchup,” which can change your appearance during video calls or conferences.

Videos: AI software — and people — form impressions of you based on videos posted on the internet. Companies now sell applications that decode and interpret body language and facial expressions recorded during job interviews. Their client organizations use the resulting data to profile the attributes of job candidates, evaluate potential strengths and weaknesses, and make hiring decisions.

If you post videos of yourself in the public domain, make sure that they depict you in a favorable light and only capture words, appearance, and body language that you feel are professionally appropriate. If a video does not represent the “you” that you want others to experience, don’t post it, or try to have it taken down.

Tone of voice: Your tone of voice in video or audio recordings can convey both emotion and truthfulness (or the lack thereof). Prosody is a well-established area of computational social science that is designed to correlate the physical properties of your speech with reliable markers of emotionality, mood, and personality. Your voice may also convey clues about your health.

One way to monitor this is to invest in feedback from an experienced executive, acting, voice, or media coach — someone who can provide you with insights about how you sound, and help you practice speaking in a manner that creates the impression you desire.

The words you use to communicate: Textual analysis of writing, presentations, and speech is a rapidly expanding field. Tools like IBM Watson sentiment analysis are now available to translate your personal style of language into a full character profile. This is possible due to a technology called natural language processing (NLP), which matches

the types of words people use with certain character dimensions (e.g., personality, intelligence, and interests). Clearly, it pays to pay attention to what you say and how you say it.

Although there is no universal formula for interpreting the written or spoken word, academic research does show some consistent patterns. The use of positive words is often associated with extraversion. If you want to come across as more outgoing, sociable, and confident, write or say words such as “fun,” “excited,” and “amazing.” Individuals who tend to have a pessimistic and emotionally sensitive disposition more frequently use negative words, such as “concern,” “worry,” and “afraid.” Those who are smart and curious tend to use more complex, unusual words such as “narrative,” “leitmotiv,” or “rhetoric.” Incidentally, that kind of language is more likely to be associated with liberal than conservative political preferences. And, unsurprisingly, swear words can signal antisocial and psychopathic tendencies, whereas self-referential pronouns (“me,” “my,” and especially, “I”) can be indicative of narcissistic tendencies.

Social media postings, shares and likes: Each of these can be analyzed for quantity, quality, and content; they have been shown to correlate with personality, beliefs, political preferences, and consumer behavior. Although we don’t know of any major companies that publicly admit to using this technique in their processes for candidate identification, recruitment, or evaluation, it makes sense to assume that they do. There is a great deal of academic research showing that our social media activity is an accurate indicator of our deepest psychological traits (for a recent large-scale study, see [here](#)).

This is why start-ups like Humantic, Crystal Knows, and Receptiviti, as well as established enterprise players such as IBM Watson, offer clients the ability to translate candidates’ Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn profiles and postings into a psychological profile of their career-related strengths and weaknesses. When posting, sharing, or reacting to social media posts, imagine that you are doing so in front of a virtual auditorium filled with your prospective bosses, colleagues, investors or partners. The more you can enlighten and inspire rather than anger or alienate this imaginary audience, the better. Warren Buffet suggests that the most successful companies are the

ones who “delight” their customers, and the same could be true of the reaction you try to elicit in anyone who invests the time to locate and make judgments about your online presence.

Manipulating the Algorithm

Digital avatars, which have become complex and meaningful in recent years, are an increasingly important component of anyone’s personal and professional brand. In curating your online “self,” first consider the different audiences that may be interested in profiling you. Depending on your career, role, and level in an organization, these audiences could include potential employers, employees, investors, counter-parties, the media, community activists, and even government officials or regulators.

Before beginning to curate your online presence, first set objectives for the impressions you want each potential constituency to have of you, and consider the respective places that each will access in order to assess you. For some people, the curation of an online presence can be as simple as adding, removing, or changing a single photo, video or social media posting. Others may need a more comprehensive and sustained approach.

Of course, this process can get quite complex and intricate, creating a cat-and-mouse game or “arms race” between humans trying to make an impression and AI trying to interpret it. For instance, when Cambridge University researchers published a study showing that “liking” curly fries on Facebook was associated with having a higher IQ, curly fries started to get a much higher volume of “likes,” presumably because people who read the story wanted to impress the algorithms. In turn, the AI could have corrected its algorithm by no longer interpreting curly fries “likes” as indicative of higher IQ, though one would still expect people who read and understood that story to be quite clever (at least in an EQ or social intelligence sense).

In order to impress the algorithms, people, and organizations that are trying to evaluate you, it’s necessary to consider both your own profile (“within-person” data) and the profiles of others in your reference group (“between-person” data). Finding the right balance between fitting in and standing out is the key to success.

The saying “you never get a second chance to make a first impression” may be as relevant now online as it always has been offline. And just a few pixels might make all the difference.

Editor’s note (7/9): A previous version of this article included an example of a company that sold an application that interprets body language and facial expressions recorded during job interviews. The company is no longer selling that product and the reference has been removed.



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