

Career story: Developing your personal brand

This career story comes from a music graduate who made her high-level communication skills the basis of a successful career in management. The account is a great resource for exploring future work possibilities within and outside your discipline. When reading the career story, reflect on what you have learnt in your degree and how this can help you develop your own personal brand.

At the back of the resource, you will find more information as well as sample questions on learning from biographies and career stories.

Sue's story

“As a performer, you can't just go on a stage and play anymore; it's not about that ... You can't be narrow minded and just focus on your discipline. That's not what employers want anymore in any field.”

Sue* graduated with an honours degree in Music Performance in 2006. Her main instrument is clarinet,* but she also plays a number of other instruments. Sue is currently the manager of a regional orchestra, a position she has held for several years. She also performs both in the orchestra and in a number of ensembles.

In her management role, Sue manages all activities of the orchestra from arranging the logistics of performances, recruiting guest artists, carrying out marketing and communication activities and coordinating events. She acknowledges:

“I was never expecting to be in a management role of an orchestra, I think I was expecting to do a lot more teaching and a lot more playing, but I guess it was a personal situation that took me away from that and then I had to find other work, just by chance.”

* Details changed to protect anonymity of research participant

After graduation and before starting her current job, Sue spent several years in a number of teaching roles in metropolitan and regional areas. She completed a Graduate Diploma of Teaching and Learning once it became a formal requirement for music teachers and she taught in a number of different schools as well as taking on private pupils. In addition to teaching, she was actively involved in accompanying choirs and she established an ensemble with friends from her course, giving regular performances.

Learning from life

Because Sue's degree program included no information on careers beyond music or teaching, she had to learn the skills and knowledge to do what she is doing now through informal channels. She comments on her learning as coming from:

“Life experience ... talking to other people and learning and reading ... what I've done within my job ... I've had to fly by the seat of my pants and take on board ... meetings and networking, reading – a lot of reading about other organisations and their models and structures, contact board members, some professional development workshops - mostly around conflict management and dealing with people.”

The narrow experience of a music degree

Thinking back to her degree, Sue feels that educators had very narrow assumptions about what a graduate could do. She suggests that educators did not consider the range of professions which those with a performance background could go into, from arts management, to music administration, to music therapy. Because the focus of educators was so narrow, students didn't know that these were options and weren't able to gain the skills required. She recalls:

“It was communicated ... if you were good enough you would be a performer, if you weren't good enough you would be a teacher ... but you could be one of the top people and you won't get an orchestral job and therefore if you haven't had any experience in teaching, or if teaching has been made to seem like it's a second option, then what do you do?”

Good at performance, bad at communication

Now Sue is in a position where she is involved in appointing other music graduates, both to performance roles and also to other roles, including education and outreach. She finds that many music graduates lack the broad range of skills that are required.

She also reports that some people who are great performers have very poor communications skills, and this can mean that they are not considered for jobs beyond performance. As she recalls from a recent interview:

“The best candidate in terms of playing did the worst interview because they just spent their lives playing. And then when it comes to having a change of career, or looking for a different option, because they don’t want to just play anymore, they don’t have the skills. ... we can assist them, but not all workplaces are going to be that accommodating.”

Developing your own brand

Looking back at how her career has evolved, Sue feels that it is essential that graduates from Performance degrees develop their own brand. She thinks there is a perception that you just perform and that is enough. As she suggests:

“It’s not just about being able to play the instrument; in fact it’s even not about that anymore, because there’s so many people who can play the instrument ...”

Sue suggests that all students think ahead to their careers. Performers need to be able to market themselves, sell their skill sets, network, and communicate well. Most of all, she encourages all performers to develop a presence on social media.

Developing your personal brand

There are now numerous resources available to help people build their own brand. These all tend to highlight the same key steps. As you read through each one, try to work out what your personal brand is.

Identify your unique selling proposition

What is it about you that makes you stand out from others? What do you want to be known for? What do you want to achieve?

Identify your target market

Who are you trying to communicate with? Which groups of people will be critical to you in developing your career?

Identify your communication mediums

Think about your target market and identify which communication mediums are most likely to reach them. Be specific: e.g., not just 'social media', which forms?

Get attention

What can you do to make yourself stand out and get noticed?

Find mentors

Most of us need people who will give us advice as we launch or develop our careers. What kinds of mentors do you need? Who could you approach?

Creative approaches

What are some other ways that you could develop your personal brand? Think of approaches that would be particularly appropriate in your desired career.

Learning from biographies and career stories

What do you see when you meet a professional?

Most of the time, we see only the role someone holds now. It is likely, however, that the person has experienced a career with lots of twists and turns.

Get the most out of reading career stories or biographies by asking yourself some of the questions to the right.

1. What do you expect you will have to learn during your career?
2. What might you need to do in order to keep learning?
3. What differences, common issues, and links can you make to your own career journey?
4. Identify and reflect on key decision points in your personal and professional development, and then consider:
 - a. Who played a significant role at these times?
 - b. To whom did you go to for advice?
 - c. What can you put in place for the next time you face a major decision?
5. Biographical accounts raise a number of challenges and opportunities. These include innovative collaborations, work within other sectors, diverse locations, and different modes of work. Look for examples of these in your discipline and reflect on what might be of interest to you:
 - a. What interests you, and what can you do to make this a reality?
 - b. What challenges do you foresee, and how will you prepare for these?
6. Biographical accounts often tell us something about the interests, passions, and motivations of the people involved. Can you think of ways to combine your interests and your future work?
7. What would you like to achieve as a professional?

This resource was developed by Sarah Richardson, Philip MacKinnon, Marian Mahat, Lisa Schmidt and Dawn Bennett.