

# Branding Baby Boomers

Bhavani Thuraisingham

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recently I read the book *Promote Yourself: The New Rules for Career Success* by Dan Schawbel and thoroughly enjoyed reading it and also benefitted from it.. Much of the focus of the book was on Millennial Branding. The Millennials are extremely social media savvy and the book goes on to explain how they can take maximum advantage of social media such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Google+ and Twitter. The author strongly encourages one to keep the social media posts current and update them as well as his/her blogs at least once a week.

I am certainly not a Millennial nor am I a Gen-Xer. I was born in the mid 1950s and am a true Baby Boomer. I grew up in the 1960s and early 1970s listening to the Beatles and watching Audrey Hepburn films and the following the fashion trends of those times. Computers came into my life during the last year of college and since then I have been developing software and conducting research in computer science. While I have a presence in social media (e.g., LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and Blogs), it is not something that comes naturally to me as it does to my students who are Millennials. I believe that we baby boomers must have a strong presence on the web so that we don't become obsolete and obscure, even if we don't have career aspirations past retirement age. This article examines the advice given by Schawbel in his book for the Millennials and explores how it can be adapted for baby boomers. I will explain the ideas first with a story of a fictitious baby boomer Jane Smith and then with my story.

## 2. STORY OF FICTICIOUS JANE SMITH

Jane has a BS in Biology with a minor in Computer Science and an MS in Computer Science with a minor in Statistics. She is 60 years old and has had a career in the Healthcare Industry – starting out as a healthcare analyst and eventually ending up as a vice president of healthcare informatics for a major hospital in a large metropolitan area. Along the way she also got an MBA in healthcare informatics. She has had a successful 35 year career and plans to work for another 5 years and start her consulting practice for at least 15 years in topics such as the Affordable Care Act and HIPPA regulations. She is also an expert on healthcare information integration. She wants to work as long as her health permits. Jane has a very limited presence on the web and is on LinkedIn and has a Facebook page that is used to share information with friends. What should she do?

**Hard skills, Soft skills, Social Media Skills** Schawbel states that everyone (although his focus is mainly on Millennials) should possess strong hard skills (i.e. technical skills), soft skills (i.e. people skills, presentations skills), and social media skill (timely blogs, Facebook postings and tweets). In the same way every boomer who wants to be relevant and have a fulfilling career until he/she is 80, should also have strong hard skills, soft skills and social media skills.

**Hard skills:** Let's take Jane as an example. She has worked for 35 years and her work has migrated from technical to business and management. Therefore for her hard skills, does she have what it takes to consult for the next 15-20 years? She has to jot down the skills she needs and the skills she has. Let's assume she wants to consult in healthcare informatics and policy related topics. Then she has to identify the areas she needs to develop her hard skills. Her technical skills may be outdated. She has five years to do that – that is, she can continue to work, develop these skills and include them in her LinkedIn and other social media sites. Regardless of whether you are 25 or 65 you need to be the best

technically. Otherwise your colleagues will start saying “she is completely off technically and is too old for the job”. If she can get certifications that show that she has the skills, it will be to her benefit. It is also time for Jane to write a book and contribute to articles in technical magazines. Of course she has to get approval from her hospital, but this is a must for her to be successful in her future career.

**Soft skills:** Jane has worked for 35 years and has been promoted to vice president. Therefore she must possess a certain amount of soft skills. Here she needs to talk to her peers, subordinates, supervisors and get advice as to how she can improve her soft skills. Note that Jane is at an age where she does not have to support children through college and has her mortgage paid off. Her husband is a few years older to her and works as a lawyer for the State after a career in private practice. They have both accumulated good pensions. Therefore she does not have to fear about getting feedback from her peers and colleagues. She has to then work on the areas that need improvement. This could be in writing or being patient or knowing what to say when. She can get coaching from speech and writing experts. One cannot think that soft skills are something you are born with. You can always acquire new soft skills. In fact I am learning every day how to deal with people.

**Social Media Skills:** This is where Jane needs to learn the most. She has some social media skills but not enough to launch her own consulting practice. It’s not just about blogging or tweeting. It is about how many likes you get for your posts and how many people are following your blogs and tweets. In addition to LinkedIn and Facebook Jane should also have a presence in Google+ and Twitter? All her posts must be entirely technical. That is, not include personal stuff in professional social media sites. Of course Jane would want to post photos of her children and grandchildren, but she must have separate sites that can be linked to her professional sites. The personal info should only be read by her friends. In fact Schawbel discusses in his book how to link the professional and personal sites.

Jane should start a Twitter account and start tweeting about news and opinions in the healthcare industry. Here again if she is working for the hospital she has to get the approval of the hospital and also state that all the comments she is making are her own. She should start a meaningful blog and write articles. As Schawbel explains, the blogs have to be current and timely. She must have as many followers as possible for her blogs and tweets. Therefore she must utilize all the latest technologies to make sure that her information is widely disseminated. This is a must. What is the point of organizing a concert with no audience? In the same way what is the point of posting a tweet with no followers. This is one of the major challenges that we boomers face when we try to become social media savvy. Our friends who are also likely to be boomers are not as social media savvy as the Millennials. So the question is how do we market also to the Gen-Xers and the Millennials? Millennials will likely not have the vast experience that Jane has accumulated over the years. Therefore her blogs should not only be about general trends in the industry, but also share her personal experience as to how she got to be a vice president in healthcare administration.

**Forge an Alliance with the Millennials:** The customers of Jane’s consulting work will likely be the Gen Xers and the Millennials. Jane must form an alliance with the younger generations. This is not easy. How can Jane form a friendship with a 30 year old? Remember that Jane has vast experience that the Millennials do not have. She must do a lot of homework as to what the different generations are interested in. It cannot come overnight. She has around five years to prepare for her next big thing. Therefore she must learn what each group wants and carry out targeted marketing. There are various tools out there that allow one to do that. Furthermore, new marketing tools are emerging daily. Jane must learn about the customer segments, use the tools and be a superb social media user and connect well with the younger generations while still maintain her association with the boomers and those who have been there before us boomers.

**Web Site?** Finally, should Jane have a web site detailing all her accomplishments? Now, LinkedIn provides capabilities to give as many details as possible to showcase your projects and accomplishments. Nevertheless a web site that can not only detail Jane's accomplishments as well as connect all her social media information including her LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and Google+ web pages and blogs would be beneficial. It's not that the more presence one has on the web the better it is. It's the more intelligent and organized presence one has the more positive publicity one will get.

**In conclusion** to Jane's story, she has everything going for her. A great career and lot of potential yet to be tapped. With social media she can continue to have a very successful career until she is 80 which her mother and grandmother could only dream about. Therefore we boomers should wake up every morning thankful for what we have achieved and work hard towards what we have yet to achieve.

### 3. MY STORY

Now we get to my story; a 60 year old woman with 35 years' work experience similar to that of Jane. Jane and I have had different carrier tracks. While Jane went through the traditional way of advancing in the healthcare industry and rising to an executive position, I was more in research with a PhD and had multiple positions from \ industry to government to academia. My story is given in by blog as well as in an article that I published in 2009 and again in 2015. Here is a summary of my career taken from my LinkedIn page.

*Dr. Bhavani Thuraisingham is the Louis A. Beecherl, Jr. Distinguished Professor of Computer Science and the Executive Director of the Cyber Security Research and Education Institute at The University of Texas at Dallas (UTD). She is an elected Fellow of IEEE, the AAAS, the British Computer Society, the Society for Design and Process Science (SPDS) and the Society for Information Reuse and Integration (SIRI). She has received prestigious awards in cyber security including the IEEE Computer Society's 1997 Technical Achievement Award for "outstanding and innovative contributions to secure data management", the 2010 ACM SIGSAC Outstanding Contributions Award for "seminal research contributions and leadership in data and applications security", the 2012 SDPS Transformative Achievement Gold Medal for interdisciplinary research, a 2013 IBM Faculty Award in Cyber Security, and the 2014 SIRI Research Leadership Award for Secure Information Integration. She has unique experience working in the commercial industry, federal research laboratory, US government and academia and her 35 year career includes research and product development, technology transfer, , program management, and consulting at Honeywell, MITRE, NSF and UTD. Her work has resulted in 100+ journal articles, 300+ conference papers, 100+ keynote/featured addresses, and 8 US patents (3 pending). She has authored 15 books and edited 12 more. She was educated in the United Kingdom and received the prestigious earned higher doctorate degree (Doctor of Engineering) from the University of Bristol, England for her published research work in secure data management since her PhD. She is a STEM mentor to women and minorities and has given featured addresses at SWE, WITI, and CRA-W.. She serves on multiple advisory boards including at Accuvant Corporation.*

As you can see I have had great variety in my career and thoroughly enjoyed it. I had the opportunities to rise up both at Honeywell and later at MITRE, but unlike Jane, I would have found it somewhat stifling. I need to be stimulated in whatever I do. Therefore while I have had 3 careers which are different but in the same field: industry, government and academia, I have learnt a lot and put myself in a unique position. Even now I get invited to apply for department head, dean, and vice president for research positions in universities, which I have declined. My goal is to make the most of what I have for the next 5 years and serve the community in the best way I can. To me my community is the computer science students, faculty, researchers, industry professionals of all ages –ranging from 18 until

88 as I have students who are 18 and colleagues who are 88. I would also like to work until I am at least 80 (health permitting) and serve as a role model in my field and take positions in Washington while maintaining my tenure in a university. So what is the best way to achieve my goals? What I will do next is examine the areas I need to work on to strengthen my hard skills, soft skills and social media skills.

**Hard skills:** Most of my education and career have been on developing my hard skills. That includes conducting research, designing products, developing prototypes and more recently supervising students and writing books on their thesis. As an academic hard skills is a must. Furthermore I went to college in the 1970s and early 1980s and therefore with technology changing so rapidly I need to keep up with the developments. Therefore I read at least one technical paper a day. In some cases I find that I need to take certifications in areas like digital forensics to be able to successfully teach the classes. Therefore I continue to get certifications from organizations such as SANS. While I am on top of my fields, I also accept the fact that there are some brilliant Gen-Xers who are my colleagues. These Gen-Xers are the ones who are mostly developing break through ideas. I cannot compete with them at my age. However I can provide a great service to them by sharing my knowledge and experience. They value it a great deal. The soft skills I have learnt over the years is also of immense help to me in my career now as well as improving my hard skills.

**Soft Skills:** When I started my career in the early 1980s my soft skills were not sharp. In fact I would often get flustered when someone attacked my work even if in many cases the attacks were due to pure jealousy and did not have merit. There was one person in particular who was *out to get me* is what I heard from my supporters. This person had very little technical education and technical skills that he/she could not handle the fact that I was highly educated and up and coming with my hard skills and getting known in the community. Therefore this person made every effort to undermine me and my work to colleagues and superiors. But this person failed badly as I was always one step ahead. When he/she tried to stop my publications, I still got them published through a different management hierarchy. I outsmarted him/her in every way so that now he/she is languishing in his/her job while I have gone from strength to strength with numerous highly prestigious technical awards. I am mentioning this only so that numerous others can learn from my experience. I learnt at an early age that *success is the best form of revenge*. This is when I really learnt my soft skills, about getting along with people and building relationships, alliances and teams and nurturing these relationships. I also learnt never to lose my temper or cool and remain calm. Over the years with meditation and practice I have now become a master at being calm and collected. It has also helped me a great deal in working out any differences with my extremely supportive husband. We have been married 40+ years and our marriage has never been stronger (touchwood) and that has come from forming a true partnership and friendship. Often during weekends we sit side by side in our living room and talk about almost anything, us, our family, our extended families, public figures, and their approaches to problem solving, scientists, politics and many more topics of mutual interests. We don't agree on many things but have learnt to respect the others' views. That is, the soft skills you learn at work will help you in your personal life and vice versa. Today I believe that my soft skills are solid. I am considered by many to be politically savvy and an excellent communicator. I don't rest on my laurels. I read books and articles such as the Harvard Business Review as well as the book by Schawbel and others to learn more about improving my soft skills.

**Social Media Skills:** This is where like Jane, I also have to learn the most. If you look at my 35 year career, between 1980 and 1995 my entire focus was on developing my hard skills. Between 1995 and 2010 while continuing to develop my hard skills I also learnt many soft skills. I took on management and leadership positions, started giving keynote presentations and am now one of the sort after speak-

ers in cyber severity and data analytics in the world. Since 2010, while continuing to enhance my hard skills and soft skills I have also got into social media. I have LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter pages and blogs and am reasonably active, but not as active as I should or want to be. This is partly because social media is new to me, and I have so much work to do with my teaching, research, running the institute, consulting and training for the US government and also involved in my start-up. At the end of it all there is hardly any time to have a strong presence in social media. I know what I have to do is integrate social media as part of my daily activities. While I send out tweets on average once a week and have a good number of followers, and keep my LinkedIn pages up to date, my blogs are about every two months and I hardly post on the Facebook page. I also have to join Google+. However, all of my social media activities are purely professional. That is, I have not brought in any personal sites into the picture. I do have a separate Twitter page where I am hoping to tweet about women and children's issues but that is yet to happen. So I am in the process of making a resolution of posting at least one blog a week starting in October 2015 and tweet at least every other day. Next step is to post useful articles on Facebook and join Google+ if it makes sense. I am reasonably active on LinkedIn. It is also important to note that one should not join a social media site just to show that one is progressive and is with the times. Social media activity has to be genuine, just like any other work or home activity. You cannot neglect the course work and then start studying the last minute. Similarly, social media has to be a big part of your life activities if you want to be relevant and noticed in this world. Finally with respect to a web site, I do have three; one for my consulting work; and one my university work, and one from my startup work. What I should do is to make it look more professional and develop links between all my social media sites as well as my web sites.

**In conclusion**, similar to Jane, I also must connect with the Millennials and Gen-Xers. I am fortunate as I work with all ages. Some belonging to the great generation (pre-baby boomer) some belong to Gen Xers and many Millennials especially my students and of course many of my peers who are baby boomers. Therefore I have this great opportunity to learn from all of them, their likes and dislikes and their ways. Through them I can reach out to others in their groups. Therefore this past year I have been exploiting this opportunity as much as possible and will continue to do so. My goal is be social media savvy, like a Millennial, by the beginning of 2016.

#### **4. FINAL THOUGHTS**

The book *Promote Yourself: The New Rules for Career Success* by Dan Schawbel has really started me thinking about having a very strong social media presence for the work I want to do in the future for the next 25 years. I would like to be the go-to person for computer scientists around the world for advice on hard skills, soft skills and even social media skills. I would like to share my vast experience with the community so that we can all benefit. In fact Jane's situation is not different from mine. Yes, each person is special and unique and in this case one size does not fit all. But I would strongly encourage you to read Schawbel's book and design a plan for what you want to do for your skills and then follow the plan. You can get feedback from your community and re-do the plan every year or so. If you do this, I strongly believe that not only you will have continued career success, but also have enormous satisfaction and get a purpose for your life. This at any age is most important. So my colleagues my age are asking me, why not a book on *branding boomers*? I have written 15 books 10 of them as a single author. It's only over the past five years or so that I have been writing motivational articles about career choices, hard work, and rewards. I plan new projects during my three week Xmas break when I review all my work for the previous year. Evaluate the progress, determine areas for improvement and forge a plan for the New Year. That is the time I will give it serious thought to what my colleagues are encouraging me to do. If I can be convinced that such a book will help us boomers then I will take the plunge.