
BRAND YOU,
AUTHENTICALLY.

When I moved to Milan, networking was the last thing on my mind. I wasn't thinking about how people saw me or what kind of reputation I was building. I was only focused on getting my work done, adjusting to life in a new city, and figuring things out as I went.

Five years slipped by that way.

I hadn't built anything close to a professional network. I didn't even know networking clubs existed, let alone why I should bother with them. My attitude was simple, if I worked hard, things would fall into place.

Then my husband, who at that time was simply another coworker, arrived from Germany to open a new branch of the company. From his very first week, he approached Milan differently than I had. While I was content to let connections happen naturally, he actively sought them out. He joined networking clubs, introduced himself widely, and quickly found his way into circles I hadn't even known existed.

I remember watching him with equal parts curiosity and skepticism.

What was he chasing?

Why invest all that effort outside the office when there was already so much to do inside it?

A few weeks later, I had my answer.

He had everything in place. He had a doctor, an accountant, and a network of trusted people who helped him settle into both work and life in Italy. However, what struck me wasn't just his efficiency. It was the way people already knew his name, even if they hadn't met him directly. He had positioned himself inside a web of trust and reciprocity, and because of that, his name carried weight far beyond his title.

Meanwhile, I was five years in and still moving slowly. The contrast opened my eyes, as it showed me just how powerful networking could be.

How networking became part of my brand?

That moment changed how I saw connection as a practice of making yourself available, both to the people you might need and to the people who might need you. Once I understood that, I began to act differently. I started going to events I would once have ignored, introducing myself more openly, and, when I could, connecting people with each other.

To my surprise, I loved it. There was a kind of energy in the room when two people I'd introduced discovered they could help each other. Watching new collaborations spark, or seeing someone walk away with exactly the contact they needed, gave me real satisfaction.

Slowly, that energy circled back to me. People would say, *"Ah, you also know Katia?"* followed by, *"Of course, everyone knows her."*

Without planning it, my reputation as a connector was forming right in front of me. It wasn't driven by self-promotion or any kind of master plan. It came simply from doing something I loved, consistently, until others began to associate me with it.

By now, you might be wondering why I'm sharing this with you. Let me explain...

Your brand exists whether you design it or not

What happened to me is happening to you too. People already have an impression of you. They notice how you show up, what you prioritise, how you make them feel, and then they talk about it. Which means, whether you've thought about it or not, you already have a brand. Jeff Bezos captured it perfectly when he said, "Your brand is what people say about you when you're not in the room."

That conversation about you is already happening. The only question is does it really reflect what you want to be known for?

When you're not intentional about your brand, it often drifts into unhelpful patterns.

One is: you believe people will judge anyway and you go with the flow, without thinking at how you do want to be perceived. The second is: you are so concerned about other people's judgement that you spend too much time and energy on obsessive perfectionism. Some examples?

The over-curated facade. You micro-manage every post, every sentence, every photo until it gleams. On the surface, it looks impressive, but it often feels hollow because it doesn't connect with who you really are. People may admire the image, yet still feel as if they don't truly know you.

The unclaimed narrative. You step away from the idea of branding altogether, trusting your work to speak for itself. The problem is, it rarely does. In the silence, people fill the gaps with assumptions, half-truths, or outdated impressions. As a result, you risk being remembered for a role you've long outgrown, or reduced to a version of yourself that no longer fits.

Both of these patterns carry a disadvantage. If you are not guiding the story and defining your brand intentionally, the brand that forms may not be the one you want to live with.

This chapter is about shifting that dynamic and bringing the outside perception closer to your inner truth, because your brand isn't a costume that you wear to fit a role, then take them off once you're alone. It's the trace you leave behind in every room, shaped by your strengths, your values, and the experiences that have made you who you are.

The question then becomes, how do you make sure that trace is consistent? How do you close the gap between how you see yourself and how others see you?

Branding as alignment

You can always feel it when alignment is there, and when it isn't. When it's there, you move through conversations with ease. You don't feel the need to wear a mask. People see you the way you see yourself, and there's no effort needed to bridge the gap. When it's missing, you notice it straight away. Someone reacts to you as if you're a different person, and suddenly you're adjusting, softening one part of yourself and amplifying another. That constant correction is tiring.

That's why I think of branding as more of a mirror. A mirror doesn't disguise anything, it simply reflects what's already there. The strongest brands work the same way. They aren't staged performances; they're the consistency people feel when they meet you in any setting, whether it's a boardroom, a conference, or just a casual coffee.

Now here's the litmus test. When people interact with you, does their experience match the person you know yourself to be? If it does, you're in alignment. If it doesn't, the misalignment itself becomes the message, pointing you to what needs attention.

Through my own career, I've seen the same thing play out again and again, no matter the role, the country, or the industry I was working in. People don't really remember you for your title or the bullet points on your CV. What stays with them comes down to three things, what I call the pillars of an aligned brand.

The first is your values, or the principles you won't compromise on. They're the compass behind your decisions, the reason your "yes" carries weight and your "no" has conviction.

The second is your working style, or the way you operate when you're at your best. For me, that's always been about connecting people, sparking

collaboration, and building relationships. Put me in a room where ideas are bouncing around, and I thrive. Hand me a spreadsheet to hide behind for weeks, and I lose energy fast.

The third is your emotional tone. It's the feeling people take away after spending time with you. For me, I want people to leave a conversation feeling both energised and supported, confident that they can trust me to connect them with what they need.

These three pillars are what shape the impression you leave behind. Titles change, and skills evolve, but these are the constants that define how well-aligned your brand is. Once you're clear on them, the next step is making sure others see them too, because it's one thing to know your values, your style, and your tone. It's another to let them show up consistently enough that they become what you're known for.

That's where authenticity and strategy come together.

Authenticity keeps you rooted in your truth. It makes sure your brand isn't a performance but a reflection of your values and experiences, and that's what people trust. Strategy makes sure those truths don't stay hidden. It's how you share your pillars in the right moments, so that when you're not in the room, people still carry your name forward.

Neither is enough on its own. Too much authenticity without strategy, and you risk being overlooked. Too much strategy without authenticity, and you end up polished but forgettable. However, when the two meet, they give you alignment by making your truth clear and visible in ways that matter.

The Strengths + Scars formula

In the last section, we looked at alignment, how authenticity and strategy work together so your brand feels both true and visible, but there's another dimension to this. It isn't only about how you show up, but which parts of yourself you let others see. This is where many people get stuck, because they believe they need to present only the polished version of themselves.

The trouble is, when you only highlight your successes, your brand can come across as curated or idealised, almost untouchable. People might admire your achievements, but admiration alone doesn't create connection. Without context or vulnerability, your brand risks feeling like a performance, something people can observe, but not relate to.

On the flip side, only sharing your scars isn't the answer either. Telling people about your struggles or shortcomings matters, but if you stop there, you may raise doubts about your reliability.

Vulnerability without growth leaves people unsure whether you've truly moved through the difficulty. Instead of inspiring connection, it can trap you in the role of victim or someone still stuck in the past.

The credibility trifecta

The truth is, credibility rests on more than just one side of the story. People look for three things before they decide whether they can trust you - competence, character, and connection.

Competence comes from the skills and results that prove you can deliver. Character shows through your values and integrity, the sense that you'll deliver in the right way, and connection comes from your humanity, the flaws and experiences that make you relatable.

Your strengths usually speak to competence. Your scars open the door to connection. Together, they reveal your character, and that combination is what turns a brand from impressive into memorable.

Take Tim Ferriss as an example. He's known for his bestselling books like "The 4-Hour Workweek" and hosting one of the most popular podcasts in the world. Yet he also shares his scars - failed business experiments, personal health struggles, moments of self-doubt.

Crucially, he frames them with what he learned, emphasising resilience, growth, and the willingness to keep experimenting. That mix is why he's not just admired for his expertise, but trusted and followed for his honesty.

So many people resonate with Tim's brand because he reflects the whole human journey - the wins, the setbacks, and the grit in between. That balance is what makes him, you, and anyone unforgettable.

Why we resist owning our brand

We've just seen how powerful it is when strengths and scars come together, but if it's so effective, why do so many of us hold back from showing it? Often it's less about not caring, and more about the hesitation that comes with putting ourselves fully out there.

I hear it often, and I've said it myself:

"If I'm good enough, my work will speak for itself."

"Branding feels fake."

"I don't want to draw attention to myself."

On the surface, these sound reasonable, even humble, but often they're not the full story. In reality, they usually mask something deeper - old experiences that taught us to play small.

Many of us learned to hold back because speaking up once led to being judged, or someone told us we were “too much” or “not enough.” Some of us discovered early in our careers that the safest path was to blend in, to match the tone of the room rather than risk standing out.

I know this pattern well. From the start of my career, I was encouraged to create a more polished and professional mask. I asked questions, voiced my perspective, and didn't always filter myself to match hierarchy. Some people appreciated it, but others decided it meant I wasn't playing the game.

The feedback I often received was that I was too authentic, too open, too direct, and too unwilling to filter. Between the lines, they wanted to tell me that I didn't hide my skepticism. For a while, I wondered if they were right. Maybe it would be easier to play safer. Yet I also knew that if I censored or moulded myself too much, I'd lose the very thing that made me trusted and effective in the first place.

What I realised later is that this isn't just a personal preference, there's a real cost when you let others shape your story instead of owning it yourself.

The cost of letting others define you.

The career cost isn't far behind. Once people put you in a box, opportunities narrow. You become "the reliable project manager" or "the operations person," even if that label no longer reflects who you are. I've watched brilliant people stall in their careers simply because they were so effective at one thing that no one thought to imagine them in another.

This is where personal branding matters. Without it, people default to the version of you they already know. With it, you can widen the lens and help them see the bigger picture of what you offer. Research backs this up with studies on personal branding showing that people with a clear, authentic brand report higher career satisfaction and employability, precisely because others can see the full scope of their abilities.

Then comes the identity cost, which cuts deeper than either emotion or career. A study on emotional exhaustion and identity confusion found strong links between the two, showing how continual misalignment gradually erodes your sense of self. This is what we touched on in the previous chapter, when we talked about emotional dissonance - the strain of acting in ways that don't match how you truly feel.

When you're caught in that space, you spend more and more energy managing impressions,

bending to meet expectations, and holding up versions of yourself that don't feel authentic. It's not simply exhausting, it's disorienting. The further you drift from your own centre, the harder it becomes to remember who that "true self" even is, and the more energy you waste maintaining the gap, the less you have left for what really matters - to create, to lead, and to connect.

All of these costs come from the same place, silence. When you don't guide the story of who you are, people rely on their own shortcuts, and those shortcuts can reduce you to far less than the truth.

The way forward isn't to fight every misperception or to prove yourself louder. It's to give people the language and the lens to see you as you really are. That's what branding is at its best.

The courage to own your story

Branding doesn't mean standing on a stage and shouting "look at me." It means giving people the right information to value you correctly. When people understand your values, your style, and your strengths, they can connect you with opportunities that match your true potential.

For me, personal branding has never been just my story. It has also been about community and

legacy, representing the people and causes I stand for, and using visibility to open space for others. That's why I took a visible stand for diversity and inclusion, even when I knew my choices would draw questions.

At Microsoft, some colleagues asked me why I would join the diversity and inclusion initiatives. "You're a white woman with two kids," they said, "you don't represent diversity." They failed to acknowledge that my lived experience told a different story.

I knew what it was to feel different, as an immigrant adjusting to a new culture, as a new mother navigating a career, as someone speaking German with an accent, and later as someone living with depression. Diversity, to me, has never been one box to tick. It has always been the human experience of difference.

Yes, there was a cost that I had to pay. Some people reduced me to a label, "the diversity lady" or "the rebel." Labels can feel limiting, like walls around your story. I knew I might lose opportunities because of it, but there was also a reward.

The last company I joined valued diversity deeply, and they hired me in part because I was clear and vocal about my stance. My brand aligned with their values before I even walked through the door.

That alignment didn't happen by chance, it happened because I chose to make my values visible and gave them the voice they needed to be heard and understood.

So as you can see, self-advocacy always carries risk. You might be misunderstood, criticised, even reduced to a single word, but silence carries a bigger cost. It guarantees that other people's shortcuts will define you. When you choose to own your story, you change the ground you stand on. The question then becomes, how do you turn that courage into something people can actually see and experience? Let's find out.

Practical steps to start aligning your brand

By now, you know two things.

First, your brand is already in motion. People have formed impressions of you, whether or not you've been intentional about it.

Second, if you don't guide those impressions, others will, and often in ways that don't match your reality.

The good news is that shaping your brand doesn't require a glossy campaign or a complete reinvention. You don't need to become someone else. What makes the difference are the 3 C's - clarity, consistency, and the courage to start.

Looking back on my own career, the shifts that mattered most weren't dramatic gestures. They were small, deliberate changes, moments when I made sure that the way I described myself, the way I showed up, and the way I connected with others reflected who I actually was. Over time, those small signals created alignment that felt natural to me and recognisable to others.

Now, I want to help you do the same. So here's how you can begin:

- Start by seeing clearly how you're already perceived.
- Translate your brand pillars into everyday language you can use in conversations, decisions, and opportunities.
- Make small, visible moves that reinforce the story you want people to tell when you're not in the room.

Step 1: Run a Brand Perception Scan

Before you can realign your brand, you need to know the story that already exists. A brand perception scan is a simple way to surface the patterns in how others see you. The goal isn't to measure popularity or to seek praise, but to uncover what people notice most strongly about you, whether or not it reflects the truth you want to be known for.

- Choose 3-5 people who know you in different settings, a colleague, a manager, a client, even a trusted friend.
- Ask each one the same question: “If you had to describe me in three words to others, what would they be?”
- Don’t steer the answer or explain yourself. Just listen and capture every word.
- Circle the words that feel true and aligned with who you are today.
- Underline the ones that you didn’t expect, those you may not want anymore, or feel misaligned.
- Look for recurring themes. These themes are clues to what’s landing most clearly in people’s minds.

What you’ll discover is often surprising. Sometimes you’ll see that people already recognise the qualities you value most. Other times, you’ll notice gaps, where the version of you that people see doesn’t fully reflect the one you want to put forward. Those gaps are your perfect starting point. They show you where to focus, so that your courage translates into alignment others can feel.

Step 2: Define Your Brand Anchors

Earlier in this chapter, we looked at the three pillars of an aligned brand - your values, your working style, and your emotional tone.

These are the things people experience from you no matter what role, title, or industry you're in.

Here's how you can define them for yourself.

Your values - your non-negotiables:

Think about the principles you would never compromise on, even if it cost you something. Ask yourself:

What do I stand for, no matter the context?

What gives me conviction when I say yes, and clarity when I say no?

Then write down three words or phrases that capture your answers.

Your working style - the way you operate at your best:

Reflect on times when you felt most energised and effective.

What were you doing? Were you collaborating, strategising, building, problem-solving?

Then think about times when you felt drained. What patterns do you notice? Your working style is the common thread that explains both.

Your emotional tone - how people feel after interacting with you:

Ask a few trusted colleagues or friends, what's the feeling that stays with them when they leave a conversation with you? Is it calm, energised, supported, challenged in a good way?

Choose the tone you want to be remembered for, and make that your guide.

Once you've defined these three anchors, you'll have a foundation that keeps your brand consistent and recognisable, no matter how your career evolves. They'll act as your internal compass, steadying you in transitions and helping others experience the same "you" in every room.

Step 3: Build Your Strengths + Scars Narrative

Your strengths and scars, when woven together, create a narrative that is both credible and relatable. That's the heart of a memorable brand. Your personal hero's journey.

I've found that the moments when people connect with me most deeply are never when I'm listing achievements. They're when I'm willing to share the harder parts, the risks I took, the doubts I faced, the mistakes I learned from.

Those are the stories that stay with people, because they carry both the strength and the scars. And people recognise their own scars in yours. They realise each of us has vulnerabilities.

How to choose your story:

Think back to one moment that shaped your life, your career, your leadership, or your outlook on work. It doesn't have to be a dramatic turning point. It can be something other people have been impressed by. Or something completely irrelevant for others but you can still remember. What matters is that it shows both a challenge you faced (the scar) and the value, skill, or insight it left behind (the strength).

How to frame it:

- **Set the scene** - Share just enough context for others to understand the challenge.
- **Name the scar** - Be open about the difficulty, risk, or doubt that made it real.
- **Show the strength** - Highlight the lesson, value, or capability that emerged from it.
- **Close with relevance** - Link the story to how it shapes who you are and how you show up today.

When you tell your story this way, you don't need to announce your values or explain your style. People will feel them in the way you describe what you've I

ived through. Instead of telling people what your brand is, you let them experience it.

We'll explore this more deeply in the next chapter, where you'll learn how to shape these raw moments - your strengths, your scars, and the lessons between them - into a signature story you can use across contexts. For now, it's enough to begin noticing the experiences that hold both challenge and growth, because they're the ones that will bring your brand to life.

Step 4: Take Micro-Alignment Actions

Big shifts in branding can feel overwhelming, almost too much to take on at once. So start with small, visible steps, and repeat them consistently, until they stick. Over time, they'll add up to your brand, making it feel both authentic and recognisable.

Here are three you can try right away:

- **Update one touchpoint** - Refresh your LinkedIn headline, your email signature, or the short bio you use in meetings so it reflects your brand anchors.
- **Use consistent language** - Begin describing what you do in a way that reinforces your values and working style, both online and in conversation.

Share one aligned story - In a meeting, a coffee chat, or even a LinkedIn post, tell a short Strengths + Scars story that shows people what you stand for. If you are afraid of making your own story public, start by commenting on other stories and share yours. It may be easier when you connect with others first.

The point is to get out and start being present with authenticity. It is important to create a rhythm of small adjustments that bring what's true for you into view for others.

Pause and Look at What You've Done

In this chapter, you've taken an honest look at what people already think about you. You recognised that you have a brand, whether or not you've shaped it. You explored what alignment looks like and why it matters, and you faced the truth that if you don't define your brand, someone else will.

Along the way, you picked up tools to help you take ownership - a brand perception scan to see where you stand today, anchors to hold your brand steady, a strengths + scars story to make it human, and micro-actions to bring it into daily practice. Together, these steps move you closer to a brand that feels authentic and aligned with how you want to be seen.

Now, pause for a moment and ask yourself:

What three things do you want people to know, feel, and say about you when you're not in the room?

- **Know** - the facts about your skills, your style, and your values.
- **Feel** - the emotional tone you want to leave behind in every interaction.
- **Say** - the way you'd like to be described to someone else, even if you never hear it yourself.

The reason why I want you to reflect on this question is because your brand isn't merely a professional image that you carry, but a story that travels with you through every stage of life. When that story is built around your truth, it becomes the confidence you can carry, and a filter that guides the choices you make.

Looking ahead..

Now that your brand is anchored, the next step is learning how to share it. Storytelling is what turns that clarity into connection. In the next chapter, we'll look at how to tell your story in a way that resonates, so it compels without performing, and connects without slipping into a script.