Thanks to your detailed investigation, your burnished skills, and the advice of your mentors, you’re beginning to develop a good sense of how you can move forward successfully into your new position or field. But your work isn’t done. You’ve conquered the substance: identifying where you want to go and cultivating the chops necessary to get there. But that won’t do you much good if the rest of the world can’t see it. Now it’s time to focus on rebranding yourself publicly so others recognize the new you and what you bring to the table. The first step is to understand what’s unique about you, so you can convey that memorably to others.

In political campaigns (in addition to my corporate work, I’ve advised on presidential, gubernatorial, and US Senate bids), one of the first things you realize is that voters aren’t going to take the time to evaluate all the ways you’re exactly
like your opponent: they’re busy people and, quite rationally, they just want to know what the difference is. Some people would call this “dumbing down,” but messaging specialists believe it’s a positive process, because it forces (often long-winded) candidates to focus. Boiling things down and explaining why you’re a compelling alternative is a powerful way to realize what’s most important about you. In this chapter, you’ll learn strategies for identifying and leveraging your points of difference, including:

- Building on your transferable skills
- Understanding what you have and they don’t
- Using the power of your identity
- Starting with the basics: your appearance as a brand
- The perils of “fixing” your brand

**Building on Your Transferable Skills**

One of the key questions to ask yourself as you plot your reinvention is “What skills or experiences do I have that can be translated into my new role?” That was certainly the question Craig Della Penna faced when he learned his dream job was being eliminated. A longtime train enthusiast, Craig had been hooked on rail trails—railroad lines converted into bike paths—in the early 1990s and eventually wrote four books on the subject. When he was offered a job as a full-time rail trail advocate, it was a “pinch-me job,” he recalls.

“It was more than walking the halls at the State House,” he says. “It was getting to the ground level and teaching locals to
move these projects ahead, to stop the anti . . . You have to travel to all these places; I was doing 900 miles a week. I’d think nothing of driving 150 miles for a public meeting to be there at 7 p.m.” But when his organization announced it would be closing Craig’s regional field office, he had to find another plan—fast. But if your unique skill is that you’re an expert in New England rail trails, who would possibly hire you?

That’s when Craig realized his special knowledge could actually serve him in many fields. Fulfilling a long-standing dream, he and his wife bought a small bed-and-breakfast in the quaint town of Northampton, Massachusetts, literally just feet from a rail trail. Marketing it as the “Sugar Maple Trailside Inn,” he caters to like-minded visitors, loaning out cruiser bikes to guests and showcasing “one of the region’s largest collections of antique railroad maps, documents, and books on the history of railroads in the Northeast.”

As his clientele grew, Craig noticed something important. “There were a lot of guests looking to relocate here,” he says. “They’d stay here and then go off with a realtor and look at purchasing a house. I thought if I became the realtor, they wouldn’t leave and I’d have a more complete marketing circle—the B&B would lead to me real estate clients.”

His suspicions were correct. Real estate license in hand, Craig went to work for a local firm and had a ready client base from the get-go: “I have five or six transactions per year from people who start off as B&B guests, and that allowed me to be an easy, laid-back realtor rather than a driven, shark-edged realtor.” It also meant he had time to pursue the advocacy that was still his passion. “I was able to do more rail trail advocacy work after I left [the nonprofit job] than when I was working for them,” he says.
Reinventing You

He initially focused his real estate practice on selling homes near rail trails, so he could share his love of biking, leverage his extensive knowledge, and implant more advocates in local communities, an important consideration because some residents still resisted the idea of rail trails and considered them disruptive or crime-ridden. “Several antis told me they’d never be able to sell their house [near a rail trail], and I became a realtor specializing in that to tweak them,” he says, laughing.

In 2010, Craig opened his own real estate office in Northampton, a franchise of a firm based in Boulder, Colorado, called Pedal to Properties, which does real estate showings by bike. “We’ll tour the house, see if it’s safe for kids to bike to school, check out the sights and sounds of the neighborhood,” he says. Biking and rail trails are a critical part of the brand: at his request, the city removed a parking space in front of his office and he installed a fourteen-bike corral. He gives out loaner bikes to clients and to guests at local hotels, and he offers weekly bike tours showing off the local rail trail network. “They’ll never put on my gravestone that I sold houses,” Craig says. “I’m like the Johnny Appleseed of rail trail conversion.”

From Legal Scholar to Wine Expert

Craig turned his unique knowledge about rail trails into a new career as a B&B proprietor and realtor. Lisa Granik, on the other hand, initially feared she’d have to throw away her hard-fought legal training as she considered a new direction. An aspiring law professor, she’d done all the right things—Fulbright research in the former Soviet Union, a doctorate
Leverage Your Points of Difference

from Yale Law School, and a hefty dissertation tracking the comparative history of sexual harassment litigation in Russia and the United States. But as she got closer to her goal, there were ominous signs. “I had several friends who were legal academics, and all of them were clearly unhappy,” she recalls. “I thought, is this my future?”

She began diving into an amateur interest of hers—wine—and taking classes. And soon, she made a surprising discovery: her training as a legal scholar was the perfect background to launch a new career in the wine industry. First, like most academics, she’d had language training in order to be able to research primary sources. Fluent in Russian, Spanish, and French, with a little Italian thrown in, Lisa found herself uniquely positioned to communicate directly with winegrowers, many of whom are farmers who don’t speak English. Second, she realized her ability to evaluate the taste of wine was shaped by her legal education. “Wine analysis is deductive,” she says, “and that’s a skill set one develops as a lawyer. It’s the ability to break a wine down with deductive reasoning.”

Third, her training in oral arguments meant she had an edge in communicating about wine: “The ability to take a complex problem and explain it to someone who’s not an expert, that’s a very useful skill that many people don’t have.” Finally, in a somewhat comic turn of events, she was even able to leverage her experience writing a dissertation. It turns out that to become a Master of Wine, a rigorous industry designation, you have to study for years, take a battery of tests, and, yes, write a dissertation about wine. Using the research skills she’d picked up on the first go-round, she was able to polish off her second one more quickly. Today, Lisa is actually the North American dissertation coordinator for the Institute of Masters of Wine.
On the surface, legal academia and the wine business have little in common. But as Lisa’s story shows, sometimes the most salient job requirements are hidden below the surface and are eminently transferable.

**Understand What You Have—That They Don’t**

Another important question you can ask is what skills or abilities you possess that are in short supply in your new field. Susan Leeds was a Wharton MBA who had worked for more than fifteen years as an investment banker: “credit products, fixed-income security, municipal bonds,” she’d done it all. After taking several years off with her kids, she was looking for a new direction. “I didn’t want to go back and do what I did before,” she says. “If I’m going to go back to work and not be with my kids, I’m going to do something I care about—something that motivates me and feels like I’m making a difference.”

As a new mother, she had developed an interest in environmental issues: “I started thinking about what’s happening in the world, and what kind of a world our children are going to grow up in.” Casually tooling around on the website of an environmental advocacy group, she stumbled onto a job listing: astonishingly, they were looking for someone with an investment banking background. Soon, Susan was on the job with a two-year policy fellowship.

It was an immediate culture shock. She’d never worked at a nonprofit, never done policy research, and had taken a massive pay cut. “I was a terrible fish out of water at that place,” she recalls. “There were four hundred employees and only two MBAs—one in accounting and the other was me.” She wasn’t always received positively: “I was a suspect person. I’m
in a world of hard-core environmental advocates and I was from the business world; there were plenty of people in the environmental advocacy field who view people like me as the enemy. I was learning to speak a different language and getting frustrated because people didn’t understand what I was saying or didn’t care about my opinion.”

Determined to succeed at her fellowship, she muscled through: “I focused on the positive aspects as much as I could, that this role was giving me the opportunity to meet and network with a huge number of people, some of them senior level, that I otherwise would have never had access to. And I also focused on the fact that I cared about the work.”

But amid the lawyers, policy wonks, and scientists, she realized she had a special skill: “They wanted someone who could talk to people on Wall Street, and I could do that.” She also saw important connections to her old job. “One of the big opportunities was making buildings more energy efficient,” she says. “You invest in them and all of a sudden, it looks a lot like real estate finance and asset finance, and that’s what I know how to do. Most of the policy work that looked at how to increase investment in energy efficiency was being done by traditionalists, and they weren’t looking at it as investments. It was about forcing people to do it, rather than a market-based perspective. You can make an investment associated with a positive return—that became my mantra, that you have to look at things differently.”

She began to develop a reputation as an innovative thinker in the field. Before her fellowship was up, she had become a coveted speaker at major conferences and multiple firms had headhunted her. Today, she runs a public-private partnership dedicated to spurring energy efficiency investments. “It’s a huge learning experience. I knew a lot about financial
Reinventing You

markets, but it’s also now about government, policy, energy, utilities, regulation, and even the real estate industry,” she says. “People look to me for policy leadership in this field, and that’s a different thing than I would have done in a million years on Wall Street.”

Leverage Your Outsider Status

Susan’s finance skills, while top-notch, weren’t unusual on Wall Street. But she made herself valuable because in the environmental advocacy world, very few people knew what she did. Her skills became a precious commodity that distinguished her and helped her rise quickly. In a similar fashion, Jason Shaplen leveraged his unique position as a newcomer in various fields. Most professions judge you on your experience—in that profession. But Jason knew he could never win that game.

The real question was, how do you take an eclectic résumé (he had worked as a journalist, a management consultant, diplomatic negotiator, presidential campaign speechwriter, Asian telecom executive, and nonprofit executive) and turn it into a strength, rather than a weakness? His answer was to simultaneously allay concerns about his competence, while intriguing others with his outsider perspective.

“I’ve worked in so many fields, I can speak the language of almost any of them,” he says. “I can talk to the hedge fund guy in his language, or I can go to the governor’s office and talk in his language about moving things through the legislature. As I meet new people, in part because I can talk a little bit of their language, they start being interested in you: He talks like a diplomat, but not a standard diplomat—maybe he can help us think about things differently. I guess I give people confidence
that I know enough about their field, yet I can bring something new and interesting to the table.”

He worked hard to learn the nuances of his new professions. “It was total immersion,” he says. “I ran like hell for the library.” But he also embraced his outsider role, which he knew gave him the freedom to suggest new ideas and approaches. “I try to keep myself out of the minutiae, to make sure there’s enough distance so I have some perspective,” he says. “You have to know how to do the mechanics, but you also want to think about it in a new way. So you actually try not to become an expert in the field. You want to be something in between: halfway between being an expert and being a total novice. It’s knowing enough to know what’s going to make a difference and be helpful, but you’re still able to think outside the box.”

He’s used that technique in his current role as executive director of a homelessness prevention agency. Even though he’s now worked in the field for nearly a decade—long enough to amass a great deal of expertise—he still tries to maintain an outsider’s perspective, looking for innovations from other industries. “We’ve created a fantastic new model for how to serve homeless children,” he says, “and that’s because I go look at how things are done in early childhood education programs, child guidance centers, centers helping kids in crisis, and that’s typically not done in our field.”

**Use the Power of Your Identity**

Above and beyond your skills and unique experiences, there’s something else you can draw on to distinguish yourself: your core identity. Sometimes, there are contributions only you can make. That was the case for Naif Al-Mutawa, a native of
Kuwait who always wanted to be a writer. In his twenties, fired up by a news report about a local man losing his dry-cleaning job because of his religion, Naif wrote an illustrated book about the importance of diversity, which eventually won a UNESCO prize for children’s literature in the service of tolerance. He won a contract for two additional books, but still considered it a side project. “My parents said it was a great hobby, but not to think about it for work,” he recalls.

By 2003, with several psychology degrees under his belt ("as close as I could get to writing and characters"), Naif thought he’d put his literary days behind him. But one day, while he was riding in a cab with his sister, she encouraged him to write another children’s book. He’d also earned an MBA from Columbia in the interim, and his mind immediately jumped to the cost-benefit analysis: “I said, ‘It would have to be something that has the potential of Pokemon; otherwise it wouldn’t make sense to write another book,’” he recalls. “It was basically my way of saying, ‘Shut up.’” But the idea began to grow on him. It turned out that Pokemon, the viral children’s phenomenon, wasn’t allowed in some Arab countries. What if, in the aftermath of 9/11, he could create a universal storyline from an Islamic perspective?

That idea turned into The 99, a group of superheroes with a Middle Eastern and Islamic flavor who display “wisdom, generosity, and the basic human values we all share,” he says. The goal? “We’re competing for the hearts and minds of the next generation, who are sometimes taught to use religion for hate.” The 99 began as a comic book series and, indeed, has become a Pokemon-like phenomenon, spinning off an animated television show that airs globally and a theme park. The 99 has even been praised as an emblem of tolerance.
by President Obama. “I made sure that from the very begin-
ing it was crafted for a global audience, knowing it could go
global if there were the right circumstances,” says Naif.

It might seem like a stretch for a psychologist—even one
with an MBA—to create a global brand of Islamic super-
heroes. But his experience as an Arab living in America pro-
duced the inspiration, his business school connections helped
him raise funds, and his psychology training gave him the in-
sights he needed to create compelling story lines. “The char-
acters all come with conflicts and problems. It’s all the
theories I learned in organizational psychology,” he says.

Naif’s experience and worldwide success show the power of
drawing on every part of your personal experience to create
your next professional identity.

Naif is a perfect example of drawing from one’s unique
background and perspective. After 9/11, the world was prac-
tically crying out for a social-justice-loving Arab psycholo-
gist with an MBA to create Muslim superheroes. But you can
draw powerfully from your own identity even if it’s unrel-
lated to world historical forces. That was certainly the case
for Hank Phillippi Ryan, the TV reporter inspired to write
by her young producer.¹

The Story Only You Can Tell

Ryan, captivated by Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan
Doyle as a girl, had always wanted to write mysteries. It took
well over two decades as a TV news reporter to take the
plunge. But when her first novel was released, it was a hit,
winning a prestigious Agatha Award, due in large part to her
likable heroine Charlotte “Charlie” McNally, an older female
TV reporter coping with the pressures of staying relevant in a youth-obsessed industry.

“The only reason these books are as textured, thoughtful, reflective, and honest as they are is that the person who is me now can write that,” says Hank, now in her early sixties and the author of several popular novels. “Twenty years ago, I was such a different person. I wouldn’t have written these things; the attitude would have been completely different. I’m writing about a woman in midlife, a TV reporter, facing the possibility the camera doesn’t love her anymore. Since I was that twenty years ago, it was impossible for me to face that. I would have fought it, but now I embrace it.”

Start with the Basics—Your Appearance as a Brand

Some might say it makes sense for you to base your brand on skills or experiences or important parts of your identity. You’ve worked hard to develop them through commitment and hard work (like Susan’s mastery of real estate finance), or they’re reflective of key values you hold (like Naif’s commitment to a tolerant Islam). But what if your brand is shaped, in others’ minds, by factors outside your control? What if, regardless of your preferences, others insist on noticing something extraneous? The only solution is to recognize what others are seeing and take control of your brand.

I frequently hear from executives who are concerned they may be viewed negatively because of physical characteristics or fundamental traits. It’s certainly easier to break in if you fit the mold—the preppy, white, hedge fund guy;
Leverage Your Points of Difference

the vaguely dorky IT genius; or the sexy blonde saleswoman. But what I’ve also seen is this: it’s much harder to stand out. How are you different from the other preppy white guys? You’ll have to work hard to make the case. But if you manage to break in and your difference is obvious, you’re already attracting the attention you need to build a powerful brand. Your presumed weakness can, in fact, become your strength. That’s what happened with my former employer, Robert Reich.

I worked as Reich’s press secretary when he ran for Massachusetts governor. From the beginning, voters and the media were fascinated by him. He was already a national celebrity, having served as US Labor Secretary in President Clinton’s administration and then writing a revealing memoir about his experiences. The public was keen to meet him and see him in action. But he knew from long experience that when he entered a room, they were in for a surprise. Everyone knew Reich was short; he’d even jokingly titled his memoir *Locked in the Cabinet*. But he wasn’t “short for a guy.” He was very short—4 feet, 10 1/2 inches, to be specific. And if you’re trying to win someone’s vote, you don’t want them to feel shocked or uncomfortable, because it distracts from the message you’re trying to deliver about jobs or health care or the environment.

So Bob, with his trademark humor, would raise the subject first. He’d crack jokes about his height so the audience would laugh with him, not at him. (He even published a book of essays during the campaign entitled *I’ll Be Short.*) In the process, he established himself as a different kind of politician, one who doesn’t take himself too seriously. He took a physical trait that could have held him back—after all,
politics is rife with the adage that the “taller candidate always wins”—and instead used it to his advantage, making him uniquely memorable. “I like that short guy,” voters would muse. “He’s really smart.” (He didn’t end up winning the nomination. But then again, neither did any of the other, taller white guys. They all lost to a candidate who was even more differentiated: a woman.)

Marketing guru Seth Godin, who is completely bald, has similarly taken a noticeable physical characteristic and made it part of his brand. Two of his books feature his head—just from the eyes up—on their covers, and on his website, you’re instructed to “Click on Seth’s head to read his blog!” If someone is going to notice your physical traits anyway, you might as well control the conversation.

Try This

- Make a list of the things about yourself that most surprise people when you tell them at cocktail parties (you were in the Peace Corps, you can speak Finnish, you’re a former professional saxophonist).

- Now write down your professional skills—the things you might tout to a recruiter (you’re a terrific negotiator, you have deep management expertise, you code faster than anyone). List at least two “proof points” for each—a story you can tell that demonstrates your expertise vividly.

- Mix and match your lists. As you think about your future goals, which align best? Which combinations are most interesting, surprising, or memorable? (People aren’t likely to forget a Finnish-speaking, jazz-playing computer programmer.)
Leverage Your Points of Difference

The Perils of “Fixing” Your Brand

Sometimes, there may be a temptation to fix what others might perceive as a physical shortcoming. But proceed with caution. It turns out that those elements may actually be a crucial part of your brand, making you memorable and likable. That’s what happened with Jennifer Grey, who was a famous actress in the 1980s, starring as Ferris Bueller’s sister and, most iconically, as “Baby,” the sheltered young woman who falls for Patrick Swayze in *Dirty Dancing*.

In a world of Stepford-like actresses, Grey was special: she had a distinctive nose that flouted all the supposed Hollywood requirements. At first, her appearance hurt her film career. “I was too Jewish for *Flashdance*,” Grey told the *New York Times* in 1987. “I didn’t even make it in to see Zeffirelli for *Endless Love*. His assistant said, ‘Sorry, we’re looking for a beautiful girl.’” But all that changed after *Dirty Dancing*, a surprise hit that she seemed destined to play. “I became recognizable, known and loved by so many people,” she said. “I didn’t look like a movie star. I had a Jewish nose. People loved seeing that.”

But, ultimately, she felt the need to change it. In the 1990s, she had a rhinoplasty that altered the way she looked so drastically that many people considered her unrecognizable. She was pretty, sure, but she didn’t look like Jennifer Grey. This scenario (fairly dire for an actress whose face is her brand) became such a running joke in Hollywood, she was actually cast as a fictionalized version of herself in the short-lived TV show *It’s Like, You Know...*, playing an actress with a stalled career. In 2010, more than twenty years
after her *Dirty Dancing* success, her footwork paid off again: she won the coveted *Dancing with the Stars* competition on TV, raising her profile and ensuring that people would finally recognize the “new” Jennifer Grey. But still, newspapers reported, she said that getting a new nose was the worst mistake she had ever made.5

In a competitive marketplace, no one is interested in how you’re the same as everyone else. Though it may be human to want to downplay your differences, that may actually extinguish part of what makes you successful. Embrace your differences, and you can turn them into your strengths.

**REMEMBER:**

- Think creatively about your skills. Being a legal scholar doesn’t just mean you know the law; it means you speak multiple languages, are great at deductive reasoning, and can make articulate oral arguments. How do those abilities translate to your new professional goal?

- The branding terrain may have changed. Unique attributes from five years ago (you know how to blog!) may have become commonplace. What’s distinct about you in today’s marketplace?

- Ask yourself: what do you have that they don’t? Turn around your opponents’ arguments. If they say you can’t make it in the nonprofit world because you’ve only worked on Wall Street, that’s likely the exact reason you’ll succeed; you bring value no one else does.
Leverage Your Points of Difference

✓ Think about the power of your personal identity. Is there a contribution only you can make because of your unique mix of background, skills, and experience?

✓ If you’re different from others in your desired field (such as a woman in venture capital), you may find it harder to break in. But you’re likely to be more memorable and successful once you’re in the door.

✓ If your appearance is unusual and likely to be noticed by others, don’t shy away from acknowledging it, and don’t rush to change it. That element may be an important part of what makes your brand memorable.