

ATWORK

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Become More 'You' With Aid Of Marketing

Author Used Principles Of Promotion To Come Out As Transgender In '90s



REX W. HUPPKE
I Just Work Here

I believe it was Rex Huppke (ahem) who once wrote:

"When we lose fundamental aspects of our personalities — like acting tough when we're innately gentle or keeping a quirky sense of humor at bay — our potential is limited. We are a less good version of ourselves."

Wise words. (I can now check "start column by quoting self" off my bucket list.)

I return to the subject of letting your true colors show in the workplace after reading about Chris Edwards, a transgender man who used his marketing know-how to win over co-workers while he was transitioning to his authentic self.

Edwards' story and his transition from female to male — which he an-

nounced to co-workers in 1995, a time when few even knew what "transgender" meant — is inspirational and instructional for people who want to show their true gender identity or sexual orientation at work.

But it goes beyond that. What he did is chart a course anyone could follow, a means of overcoming fears that the real you might not be embraced by co-workers.

"It's like a marketing strategy come to life, only you use it on yourself," Edwards told me. "Authenticity seems to be the term in corporate America. Everywhere you go, so many companies seem to be promoting this and wanting to bring people in, to encourage their employees to be themselves and look for ways where they can feel comfortable showing who they really are."

It sounds easy enough, because that's what many companies claim to want. But if there's a part of you that you've never shared in a work setting, letting that out can be daunting.

"When you get to what-



MAUREEN SARGENT PHOTO

Chris Edwards says he used "evangelism marketing" to gain workplace acceptance as a transgender man.

ever it is, for me it was my gender, for somebody else it

could be overcoming an addiction or being newly divorced or maybe you have physical handicaps of some sort, people are going to look at you differently," Edwards said. "How can you manage that and control that and get them to see the person you are and the person you want to see?"

Edwards struggled with those questions but then realized the tools he needed were part of his profession. He was an advertising executive, and one of the key con-

cepts at the time was "evangelism marketing," which uses people who like a brand to spread their love of a product or company via word of mouth.

In his memoir, "Balls: It Takes Some to Get Some," coming out in October, Edwards wrote: "So I figured, why not turn my co-workers into brand evangelists for me? ... I would tell a core group of co-workers my story personally, coach them on how to pass it on."

His father ran the company he worked for, so Edwards announced his transition to the company's board first and then, as soon as that meeting ended, had his "brand evangelists" start talking to other people in the company about what was happening.

From his memoir: "My marketing strategy was working; my 'brand' was being promoted and defended from all sides."

It wasn't all smooth sailing, of course. But Edwards' new brand was embraced with relatively few problems.

"My strategy was to be myself through it all," Edwards wrote. "Show everyone that while my gender might be changing, the essence of me wasn't: I was still 'Me,' just 'Me 2.0.'"

The obstacles a transgender person faces are obviously far more complex than someone who simply wants to reveal a different part of his or her personality. You're not going to call a meeting to announce that you do stand-up comedy on the side and plan on becoming a lot funnier at work.

But the principles of Edwards' approach still

apply. Look at yourself as a brand. Think about the people who like your brand. Talk to them, tell them about the part of yourself you've kept tucked away and ask them to help support you as you become more ... you.

"I think a lot of people are just paralyzed by fear," Edwards said. "They think, 'Well, I really want to be this or I want to do this in my life or I want to change my job,' but they don't know how. The main message of empowerment that I deliver in the book and when I speak is that we all have the power within us to control how people define us. Instead of sitting there and worrying about what other people are going to think about you or say about you, we can shape the way they think about us and shape the way they view us and define us. By putting yourself in control and realizing that you're in control, that gives you all the power you need to be your authentic self."

As a wise me once said, when we leave behind key aspects of our personalities, we become less good versions of ourselves.

Maybe letting the real you out at work isn't as complicated as you think. Maybe it's just a matter of taking the time to form a strategy. And making sure you're not branding yourself short of who you really are.

TALK TO REX: Ask workplace questions and share stories with Rex Huppke at IJustWorkHere@tribpub.com. Also check out www.facebook.com/rexworkshere and www.chicagotribune.com/ijustworkhere.

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KILLER ROBOTS

Cast To Robotic Wolves

Lionfish Killer Built For Invasive Creature

By **KATIE METTLER**
Washington Post

Drifting against the brilliant blue backdrop of tropical, crystalline waters, the lionfish is exotic and beautiful. Its fine fins and thin, venomous spines feather out from its body, plump and painted in vertical stripes of white and rust red.

It's mesmerizing, lumbering there, until it opens its mouth.

Like a vacuum cleaner, the lionfish moves along the ocean floor, slurping up glutinous amounts of bait fish crucial to the ecological equilibrium of the already fragile coral reefs. In weeks, the lionfish can decimate the juvenile fish populations on a reef by 90 percent. It breeds rapidly. It has no predators.

And it shouldn't even be there.

Native to Indo-Pacific waters, the lionfish, thanks to evolution, is hardly disruptive at home.

But when fish hobbyists in Florida introduced the species to Atlantic waters in the 1980s, other sea creatures there did not know enough to see the invasive lionfish as a dangerous predator.

In the three decades since, the species has overwhelmed the entire east coast of the U.S., spreading as far north as Rhode Island and south to the Florida Keys. They've bled into the Gulf of Mexico, throughout the Caribbean Islands and the northern coasts of South America.

They've even wandered out to Bermuda.

It was there, during a scuba diving trip last year, when Colin Angle and Erika Ebbel Angle were urged by locals to help fix the problem. She is a biochemist and the executive director of Science for Scientists. He is the CEO of iRobot, the

company that built the Roomba.

During a break between dives, the ludicrous-sounding idea bubbled up.

In the 21st century, an era of drones and Teslas, they wondered if conservationists were thinking too primitively?

Perhaps, the divers thought, what the effort needed was not additional spears, but something more advanced.

They decided on killer robots.

Within a year, the Angles established a nonprofit called Robots in Service of the Environment, tapped John Rizzi, an aeronautical engineer, to lead the organization as executive director and commissioned the production of their stealthy invention.

They have no idea if it will work. But so far, nothing has.

Whole Foods grocery stores in Florida, the state called the "epicenter" of the problem, started carrying the fish, hoping it would encourage fishermen to kill more. Lionfish spearing tournaments are being held across the state. Fishing season for the species is never closed, reported the Tampa Bay Times, and officials enforce no bag limits.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission offered a bounty to any diver who speared 10 lionfish during lobster hunting season.

The creature, swimming inside a large aquarium, even made an appearance on Mark Cuban's reality TV show, Shark Tank, when two entrepreneurs with Traditional Fisheries tried to get investors to finance making lionfish meat a commercial product.

The challenge, the men said, is harvesting the fish. They live in deep caves and won't respond to baited hooks. Spearing them is the

only way, requiring a great deal of manpower, and that's just the lionfish that live where divers can reach them. Some flourish deeper, where humans can't swim.

The killer robot, Rizzi hopes, will get around those challenges.

The mechanism will use technology iRobot developed for the Roomba, powering the remotely operated-vehicle to move along the ocean floor. It will be controlled, "almost like a video game," Rizzi said, by a human on a boat above the surface, who will use an underwater camera attached to the robot to hunt down the lionfish.

Attached to the ROV will be a retention bucket for the creatures and a tube to suction them once they've been killed.

The killing, Rizzi said, will be accomplished through electrocution.

Two probes, like metal sheets, box in the fish, then send an electric current through it, as if there were a wire there, Rizzi said. Because the lionfish is an apex predator, at the top of the food chain, it fears nothing.

"What is really surprising to us ... is that when you approach the fish they don't move," Rizzi said. "They don't swim away."

The goal is for these robot harvesters to fall in the hands of fishermen and ecotourists who will make lionfish hunting a sport. It should, Rizzi said, exceed the limitations inhibiting spear fishermen because the robot can navigate deep caves and ocean pockets unreachable by divers.

It might create jobs, Rizzi said, and expand the demand for lionfish commercially.

They hope to have the first fully assembled robot in the water by the end of the year, and the first commercial release by the beginning of next summer.

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