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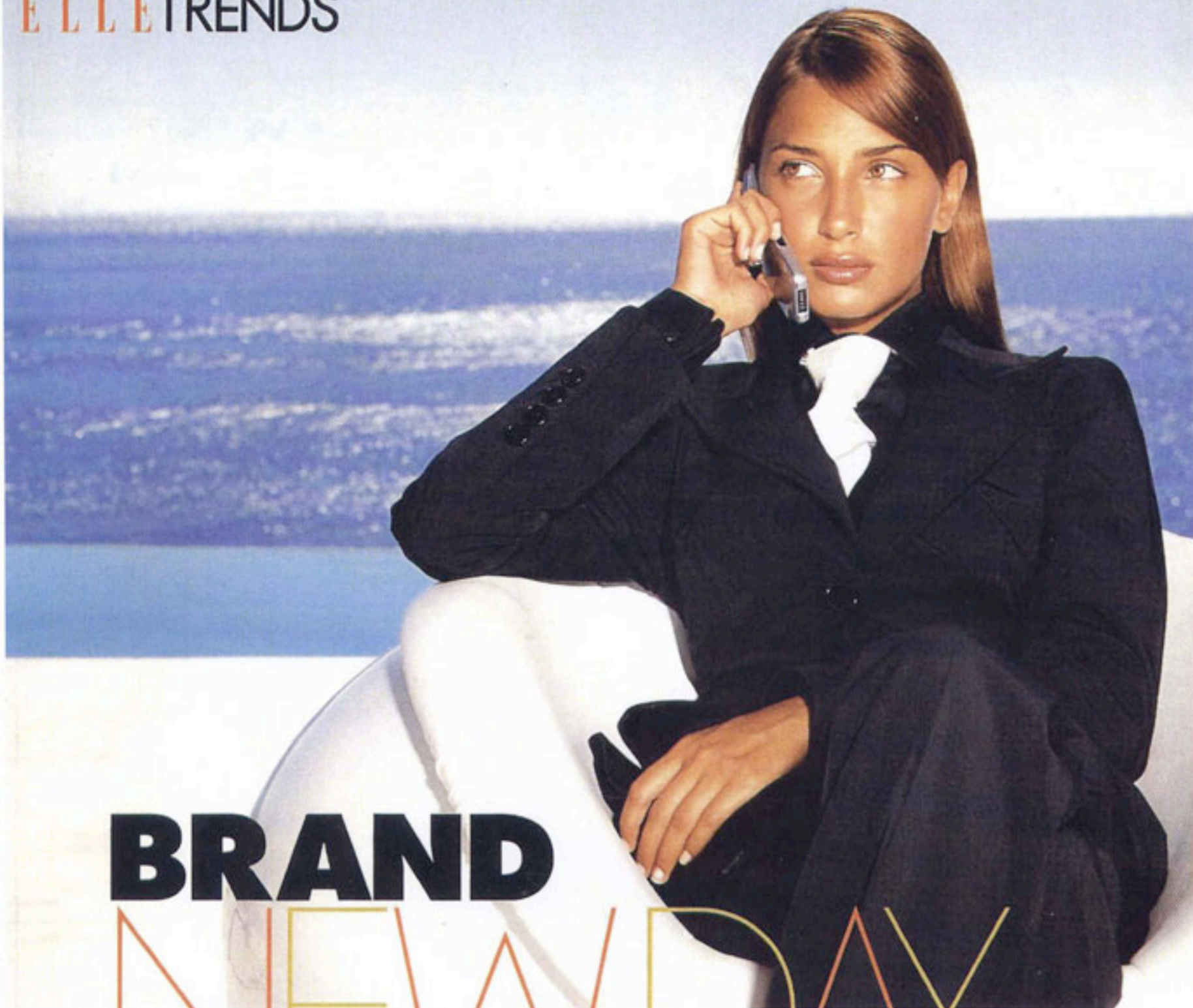
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BRAND

NEW DAY

Can personal branding bring you bliss in the boardroom—and maybe even more in the bedroom? TEXT: SUSAN CATTO

Once the exclusive province of CEOs and celebs, personal branding is gaining kudos with those who are keen on choosing their next career move, learning about themselves or even updating their look. But is there a downside to packaging our interests, skills and dreams with the same marketing strategies that are used to sell toothpaste?

Meenu Chhabra, a 32-year-old M.B.A. from Toronto, recently traded in her executive position at a Milan-based biotech firm for an

even better position at a pharmaceutical company based in Geneva. Her secret? “Being smart and working hard certainly don’t hurt,” says Chhabra, “but my secret weapon is personal branding.”

Over the past 10 years, Chhabra has consulted Toronto-based personal brand strategist Paul Copcutt (www.squarepegsolution.com). The self-knowledge that Chhabra has gained has helped her to better market herself to employers by emphasizing her key qualities: honesty and integrity.

“The process forces you to emerge from your comfort zone and start exploring the real you,” says Chhabra. “I have discovered that I’m a risk taker and I look after the people I work for. I also thrive on change.” Personal branding has helped her choose jobs that fulfill her interests and play to her skills, and she would recommend it to any woman who is interested in enhancing her life.

When personal branding started to take off in the '90s, business gurus like William Arruda, Peter ▷

WHILE MANY STILL VIEW PERSONAL BRANDING PRIMARILY AS
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Montoya and Tom Peters taught their disciples how to market their unique abilities to clients and employers. Position yourself as a premium product (the Prada of product managers or dairy consultants), went the logic, and premium opportunities and hefty paycheques would soon follow.

But while many still view personal branding primarily as a career tool, a growing number of consultants believe that it can transform your personal life too. "One of the powerful things about branding

is that it's all about attracting your ideal—whether it's your ideal partner in business or in life," says Nina Burokas (www.leadlikeawoman.com), a personal brand strategist based in Orange County, Calif. Copcutt adds that while men tend to look at personal branding as a shortcut to job advancement, women like to use it to build a life that reflects their core values.

Personal brand strategists typically work with clients for several months. Through discussions, writing exercises and other tools, they

help clients identify their core values, explore how others see them and develop strategies to translate their skills and interests into meaningful work. Fees usually start at about \$1,500 and rise from there—to \$10,000 or more—depending on the length of the work involved and any extensions to the personal branding exercise, such as website or logo development.

Then there's the boutique approach: in 2005, Vancouver entrepreneurs Carrie McCarthy and Danielle LaPorte launched their Style Statement system (www.stylestatement.com). So far, they have landed more than 400 clients and a six-figure book deal, and their gift certificates were in the stars' swag bags at this year's Critics' Choice Awards. They are also currently in talks for their own TV series.

After interviewing me extensively (see sidebar), LaPorte presented me with my two-word Style Statement: Sophisticated Expression. "The first word is 80 percent you—that's your core and essence," explains LaPorte. "Your second word represents your creative edge—that's what you are putting out in the world and want to get back."

Vancouver graphic and product designer Natasha Lakos, 26, uses her Style Statement—Composed Enriching—to guide her choice of home decor and gifts. "It distills the essence of who you are—what's important to you," says Lakos. And it has had an immediate impact on the way she presents her business to potential clients. "I had been meaning to create a website for myself, but I really got stuck on what feeling I wanted to convey," she says. "The very day I had my Style Statement done, I went home and planned my site."

Tina Goodwin, 48, used her Style Statement—Cultured Sensuous—as a touchstone that she referred to▷

STYLE STATEMENT

The essence of your being in just two words?

I admit to being skeptical. How can someone explain my essence in two words—and how can she do it after speaking to me for just an hour and a half? But that's what Danielle LaPorte does every day as co-creator of the Style Statement system—and here she is doing it for me. In a soothing voice, she asks question after question: How do I feel about my wardrobe? Where do I feel most comfortable? What would I wear to the Oscars?

As my answers pile up, I'm struck by a painful realization: I keep referring to my love of clean lines, elegant clothes and unlimited spaces—like the view from the edge of an ocean. But my personal environment is the exact opposite: toys and laundry baskets clutter the floor of my bedroom, the walls are a turgid colour that my husband calls Sylvia Plath green, and my daily wardrobe of drab staples—grey pants, black sweaters—makes me feel like I never really get dressed. As my interview with LaPorte comes to an end, I wonder if my Style Statement will

help bring my surroundings into alignment with my ideals.

I have my answer in 90 minutes: Sophisticated Expression. The first word represents my core and essence, explains LaPorte; the second, my creative edge. "Sophisticated." Synonyms: worldly, cultured, streetwise, practical. That is me—or, at least, 80 percent of me! "Expression" is the one that really gets my attention, though. Synonyms: communication, emphasis, voice. These qualities are indispensable to my work as a writer but woefully under-represented in my wardrobe and home decor.

So, I'm beginning to redress the balance, starting with enlivening my wardrobe with dramatic jewellery. I'll keep my Style Statement in mind when I shop for clothing or choose a replacement for that ghastly green paint. And I'll use it any time I need a reminder that there's a "me" in there behind the mother, wife and worker I've become—and her Sophisticated Expression is demanding to be heard. □

while choosing fabrics and colours for her Vancouver clothing boutique, Three Graces Fashion. “I don’t know that it’s changed me so much as helped me understand myself,” says Goodwin. Turning her back on the shop’s distinctly ’80s peach colour scheme, she painted most of the space a luminous, old-world gold, adding rich copper accents with an intriguingly touchable texture. “Now, whenever I make a decision, I do a little inward check,” she explains. “Cultured, sensuous...anything that rings both bells fits.”

McCarthy and LaPorte charge \$500 for a Style Statement, but if the two words that come to mind when you think of yourself are “cash” and “strapped,” cheaper, less personalized services are also available. For about \$35, you can buy a month’s subscription to 360°Reach (www.reachcc.com/360reach), a confidential online

But some observers wonder if branding’s spillover from the corporate world to our personal lives is an entirely benign phenomenon. “It has the potential to take what’s negative about corporations and undermine what’s positive about individuals,” says Lisa Wood, a professor at Laurier Brantford in Waterloo, Ont., who teaches a course on consumerism and identity. She points out that a branding tool—or consultant—cannot help but slot you into its pre-established range of possibilities. “Choice is limited according to the rubric that is used in its assessment,” explains Wood. In other words, in our rush to brand ourselves, we run the risk of tidying our messy humanity into a neater but much less interesting package.

However, when it’s approached creatively, personal branding can help us appreciate our unique attributes and ambitions and guide

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questionnaire that you send out to your friends and colleagues. In one question, respondents are given a list of close to 130 adjectives (like accessible, prolific, impatient, witty and so on) and asked to choose six to eight “brand attributes” that fit you. Theresa Thomas, a business-etiquette consultant in Orange County, Calif., found that about 80 percent of her respondents labelled her “confident” and 75 percent said she was “communicative.” She proceeded to design an extra-large—that is, confident—business card for herself that explains the answers to five common etiquette questions (the communicative part). The card helps her get new clients.

us toward work and life decisions that nourish both. As with personal training, a skilled advisor is a valuable resource, but, ultimately, you’re the one who has to do the real lifting.

And, just like a great wardrobe, a great personal brand will need updating as your life changes. Chhabra, for one, will soon be updating her brand to reflect more personal goals, like sailing across the Atlantic Ocean. The process has helped her realize that while you *can* have it all, you won’t necessarily get it all at once. “The trick,” she says, “is to emerge from your comfort zone, chart a course for yourself and follow it.” □