

VOGUE COMMENT

At a crossroads in her life, New Zealander Georgia Stephenson sought out the two words that might encapsulate her very self. "I'd been living in Sydney for five years and I'd just moved back to Wellington because my Dad had died. It was one of those things where I was thinking: who am I?" The answer: Elegant Culture. Stephenson says she taps into her Style Statement when shopping and making personal choices. She now works part-time as a policy analyst and is in the early stages of setting up a business for sustainable design – how Elegant Culture!

Toronto-based Romana Mirza first heard of Carrie & Danielle when she was developing her own brand strategy firm, Studio Pinpoint. Of her phone consultation, she says: "It was more powerful and emotionally moving than I could ever have imagined." Her new brand: Constructive Graceful. "I got Constructive. It's just what I am. It's my DNA," she says. "But the Graceful, it was just out of the blue." So Mirza took up dance-movement classes, redesigned her business card and delved deeper. "I don't think I would have been able to find the unique power of who I am had I not been made aware of Graceful," she says. "There are a lot of people who can work a spreadsheet just as well as I can but my creative edge is being graceful."

When I ask Marylouise Caldwell, a senior lecturer in marketing at the University of Sydney if there is much difference between a service like Carrie & Danielle's and personal branding, she shoots back: "Doesn't sound any different to me."

Ten years ago, management guru Tom Peters wrote the essay "The Brand Called You" in *Fast Company* magazine. What followed was a guide to being a really annoying person. Volunteer for committees! Write the notes! Put yourself forward! "It's this simple," he wrote. "You are a brand. You are in charge of your brand. And there is no one right way to create the brand called You. Except this: start today. Or else."

Sue Currie, a former television newsreader and CEO of Sydney's Shine Communications, insists: "You do have to stand out to get ahead." Currie is in the business of personal branding. She charges AU\$500 for a series of conferences to develop clients' signature statements. "It's not about being annoying or brash," she says. "It's about letting your true self come out – recognising it and understanding it."

LaPorte, however, is sensitive about being labelled a brander. "We really want to make a distinction between a Style Statement and a brand. Branding is about packaging stuff. Usually it's about packaging yourself so you appeal to the marketplace. A Style Statement is about evoking what's genuine, what's already there."

"The word brand is overused," says Linda Scott, author of *Fresh Lipstick* (Palgrave) and an Oxford University academic. "And the connection to a person never quite makes sense to me because a person being a person can never be a thing. A brand is something we do to things. Because [personal branding] came out of an MBA environment, it seems like such an MBA thing to do, like wearing a suit all the time or carrying a briefcase."

To Scott's mind the process of securing a Style Statement seems more like therapy than personal branding. "You are paying someone to pay attention to you for an extended period of time. Maybe your best girlfriend will spend a whole night listening to you when you've been dumped, but the rest of the time you're

important to women. "Women do not seem to be as adept at making sure their value to the corporation is known. They don't go around tooting their horns about what they contribute as much as men do. Sure you need to know who you are," she says, "but does everyone else know?"

Women seem particularly keen to find out who they are in these sorts of ways. Ninety per cent of Carrie & Danielle's clients are women. Currie also sees mostly women in her Balmain office. You could say a Style Statement and much of personal branding is "chick crack". Former *New York Times* rock critic Neil Strauss defines "chick crack" in his book *The Game* (William Morrow) as "any spiritual or psychological subject that appeals to most women but does not interest

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not really expected to draw quite so much attention to yourself. [Services like these are] really an extreme luxury. It's human, intelligent, sympathetic attention focused on your favourite topic!" She adds, half-jokingly, "I think I might like to do it too."

But shouldn't we just know who we are? Why do we need to pay someone to tell us? "I don't think we do know who we are," says Michael Morrison, lecturer in retailing at Monash University. "If someone confirms that you're a particular person and they're credible, they're confirming that you've got a great personality – why wouldn't you be attracted to it?"

Working out who you are is a central part of life's journey. "Think of the self as something that you either discover or create," says Scott, "as opposed to something that is obvious – and we all know that it is not obvious. We're always discovering, like, 'Oh dear, after all this time this job is not for me.'"

At its New York headquarters Estée Lauder runs a year-long course for entry-level employees called You Inc, during which participants set about developing their personal brand. They ask questions such as, is my brand relevant for the needs of the company? Do I deliver on my personal brand promise?

Phoebe Farrow Port, vice president of global management strategies at Estée Lauder, believes branding is especially

men, such as astrology, tarot cards and personality tests."

"Women are more curious about self," says Currie. "Maybe it's a confidence thing too; they want to have clarity about who they are." As to why her clientele of "students, scientists, CEOs" are mostly women, LaPorte says: "Women tend to be more introspective. The feminine nature has to do with introspection, nurturing and connectivity. We want to feel full."

LaPorte's clients go into each session wanting to know more about themselves. (Or, as Morrison quips: "The more you pay, the more people listen.") "[These are] people who have been struggling for a long time to figure out their life purpose," says LaPorte. "When we get them in the right space and we say fill in this blank: my purpose in life is ... they blurt out some divine answer."

Stephenson has stopped and filled in the blank. "We spend so much time doing stuff we don't stop and think about who we are," she says. "Particularly as adults, you get to a stage where in many ways you think you know who you are but you don't really make the time to take stock."

And now Enduring Bold is on the phone, across three time zones. "By the time I was in my 30s, I knew who I was," she says confidently. Her lifestyle mantra, she tells me, just gave her focus. "The only thing that I have to add," she says, "is that it is really, really fun."