



Stacey Ross Cohen

Author to everyone:

## Personal branding is key in a competitive world

RANDI CHILDS PHOTOGRAPHY

By TODD SLISS

Personal experience has taught Stacey Ross Cohen about personal branding — and she learned that it's for everybody, not just celebrities and would-be influencers.

"There's a big misconception about personal branding and a lot of people don't like the words because they think of the Kardashians," said Ross Cohen, who founded and runs Co-Communications, a public relations and marketing firm. "But personal branding is about what is your value to others? What are you bringing the world?"

The former Edgemont and Mount Kisco/Chappaqua resident who now lives in White Plains authored "Brand Up: The Ultimate Playbook for College & Career Success in the Digital World," with Jason Shaffer and Alan Katzman (<https://brandupbook.com/>). It's an informative 190-page workbook filled with insights and ways to look at oneself to create your own brand or image.

Being a "master of first impressions" is key when college admissions officers and prospective employers are combing through applications.

"I wrote the book to help teens stand out and excel in the digital age," Ross Cohen said. "The focus is for them to discover their superpower and leverage social media for success."

Included in the book are "essential life skills" like networking, entrepreneurship, interviewing skills, thank you letter templates and using LinkedIn, which is something teens should become versed in when parents "hand over the car keys" at 16.

When her daughters were in high school, which was "so competitive" that many kids had high anxiety levels — and 4.2 GPAs — Ross Cohen had an epiphany. "You've got to start marketing yourself early and you've got to start standing out," she said. "In order to land on top of an admission officer's pile you really needed to convey why you were the right choice."

As a "big news consumer," Ross Cohen learned that admissions officers and job recruiters were looking at social media as part of their decision-making process, and recalled 2017 when Harvard rescinded several admissions based on inappropriate online behavior.

"It hit me that in today's competitive world, personal branding is not a luxury, it's a requirement," Ross Cohen said.

She even called personal branding "a muscle" and she found a school in North Broward, Florida, that was teaching a mandatory digital leadership class to 14-year-old students. The teacher, Shaffer, ended up being one of the co-authors of the book. Ross Cohen went to observe his class and was "blown away to see these 14-year-olds tell their narrative and be able to articulate their super power."

The book was initially supposed to be for parents, but the authors shifted their focus with so many unknowns during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The college admissions game has changed so much," Ross Cohen said. "They are using deep analytics and AI [artificial intelligence] to see if kids are interested in going to the school. I tell kids if you are interested in going to the school you've got to register on the website. Schools are looking at how often you're coming to the website, how often you're staying. They are looking at all these analytics and I believe the pandemic has accelerated this."

"For example college visits, which were predominantly done live, [now] they're looking at other things, other ways to check the box to show demon-

strated interest."

Ross Cohen would like to see this become an integral part of every high school curriculum to "level the playing field and give all kids an edge" no matter what path they choose for their future. She has donated books to youth organizations, run training sessions and is creating a teen ambassador program.

The whole thing continues to evolve organically and she even has scheduled a session with refugees from the Ukraine who are living in Poland and "need help packaging themselves for the new world that they're facing."

Ross Cohen said parents need to model good behavior online and consider what they themselves post about their children, whether it's photos or information.

"As parents we have to be really mindful," she said. "I interviewed a 'sharenting' expert and changed my thoughts to-

traditional twin beds ... I always wanted to be unique and memorable, and that's really what personal branding is about. The best compliment I could ever get is, 'Stacey, you are so unique.'"

### An entrepreneur at heart

Ross Cohen was born in Brooklyn into an entrepreneurial family that came from very little. Her father was a drummer who ended up transitioning into the fashion industry and starting several businesses over the years. Ross Cohen started her very own business with a friend as a 14-year-old. Unsatisfied with what baby-sitting jobs were paying to watch "rambunctious" children, the two girls set up a home waitressing service where they set up, served and cleaned up after people's parties in their homes where they lived at the time in Rockland County.

"It was really exciting," Ross Cohen

said. "I would be salivating. What are you working on today? They'd be [working on] a Mick Jagger world premier opening downtown. I would walk back to my office like a little sad puppy."

The PR department was soon eliminated, but as a recent Fordham University MBA graduate, Ross Cohen met a woman at an event who had started her own agency and hired Ross Cohen to be part of her team.

"I was seeing her start a business and she really leaned on me," Ross Cohen said.

Ross Cohen got her first media placement on her second day of work — an item in Forbes on Dr. J (Julius Erving) and the NBA — even though she was learning what a "pitch" was and was "shaking like jelly" while writing that first pitch. "It was my first placement and I just fell in love with PR," she said.

Ross Cohen moved to Central Avenue in Edgemont to be in the suburbs, but still close to the city. She found it too much of a hassle to park the car every time she wanted to take a walk with her first daughter and in 1997 they moved up county. She was freelancing PR and writing articles at that time, and after being denied access to clients when writing an annual report for a tech company, Ross Cohen knew it was finally time to go out on her own and do things the right way.

"I had the epiphany this wasn't the way to run an agency," she said. "I knew I could run an agency better and I knew I wanted to work directly with the client. Co-Communications was born 25 years ago in a spare bedroom in my house in Mount Kisco. Just really no lofty goals. I just wanted to do it better and I became very entrenched in Westchester..."

"To this day I'll tell prospective clients the one that considers us a partner, not a vendor, will get the best possible outcome because when you get into those other situations it generally doesn't bode too well."

Ross Cohen joined the Westchester Association of Women's Business Owners (WAWBO), which is now defunct, and started to hire a staff working out of her house. Her first intern from Pace University is still with her today, as is another employee who had left at one point but is now back part time.

A longtime early client was the Boys and Girls Clubs of Northern Westchester. Ross Cohen is proud of not having a lot of client turnover, which she said is "unusual in this industry," in addition to having a "really diverse" client base including education groups, school districts, health care organizations, colleges and start-ups, and she's even gone nationwide with some of her clientele.

One interesting recent account was the campaign for the construction of the new Tappan Zee Bridge, later named The Mario Cuomo Bridge in a budget deal made by then-Gov. Andrew Cuomo. Of course, the first question asked was always about the renaming of the bridge, which cost nearly \$4 billion and opened in 2018.

"We were hired to educate the different stakeholders in the community, the different environmental groups, to build awareness," Ross Cohen said. "We called the campaign Build a Bridge Now to create some urgency. The bridge had lived well beyond its time. It was a very exciting campaign."

Ross Cohen enjoys tackling the new challenges that come her way.

"Really the new competitive advantage for brands and individuals is all about innovation and change, because you know the saying that if you keep doing the same thing you'll get the same result, but I think if you keep doing the same thing you're going to get stuck in reverse," she said.

It's only full speed ahead for Ross Cohen.

*"I've always been a risk-taker and love challenges."*

— STACEY ROSS COHEN

tally. My mindset has changed so much. I will never ever without asking permission post my children. I will show them a picture and ask them if it's OK to put it up on my Instagram. You've got to ask them for permission. You can't post without asking them because it's their digital footprint, not yours. Parents are so concerned with their kids' social media, but they have to be mindful of what they're doing as well."

Ross Cohen never meant to become a book author — she had contributed to other books and publications — but now that she has, she sees it as a series going forward. Her journey with this one began more than five years ago "kind of by accident" when she was working with a nonprofit that helps unemployed and underemployed "career transitioners" who had "trouble packaging themselves."

"That's my superpower," Ross Cohen said. "It doesn't matter if it's a product or a service or a person, I'm really good at packaging things."

Ross Cohen said with 6 million searches per minute, "Google is the new résumé, so you can't leave a digital footprint to chance. This is a learning [curve] to all of us. It's just developing the skillset early."

Scarsdale's Harry Moseley, the former Global Chief Information Office for Zoom, was quoted in the book saying, "The pandemic has changed the way we work forever. With the rise of technology and the gig economy, it's more important than ever to prepare kids for the future. That's where 'Brand Up' comes in. The book provides students with skills to achieve academic and career success, including goal-setting, building a strong online presence, interviewing, networking, entrepreneurship, and so much more."

You wouldn't even believe "a big part" of why Ross Cohen moved in the direction of personal branding. It's because she has a twin sister and there's nothing more connected than twins.

Ross Cohen did a TEDx Talk in 2018 and spoke about being a twin.

"I feel like this has become my purpose in life," she said. "Being a twin is everything. It has helpfully shaped my quest to stand out and help others ... Growing up as a twin wasn't easy. There was always constant comparisons like, 'Why does your sister get better grades than you?' and, 'Why do you weigh more than her?'"

"Then I had an aunt [who] didn't even know our names. We were 'the twins.' 'Are the twins coming?' We even had

said. "I've always been a risk-taker and love challenges, so it's almost like I'm the type of person who when someone says, 'Oh, you're not going to be able to do that,' I'm like, 'Yeah, just watch me.' I grew up with a can-do attitude. Running my business and raising my two girls, they always know there's two words I don't want to hear, 'I can't.'"

"My mantra is you've got to be a problem solver, not a problem spotter. If you're just whining about a problem you're just going to get stuck. You need to get out of your comfort zone on a continual basis. At an early age, I was really comfortable bending the rules and just trying new things."

In 1998, Ross Cohen started Co-Communications, which is now a full service public relations and marketing firm as she has adapted with the needs of her clients and the demands of increased engagement, such as websites, content development and social media for businesses of all kinds.

"We're on a mission right now to get savvy with everything AI [artificial intelligence] and how we can serve our clients better using it and just be more efficient," Ross Cohen said.

Ross Cohen didn't major in communications at Syracuse University. She studied human development and social work. She originally planned to work in gerontology, but when she worked at a nursing home during senior year, she just couldn't handle patients dying and being told about it casually in conversation by superiors like it was just another day. "I went back to my campus apartment with tears streaming down my eyes and I knew it was not for me," Ross Cohen said.

After graduating from Syracuse in 1982, Ross Cohen got a job in human relations with a large advertising agency because she is a "people person." She wasn't long for the HR department as she was inquisitive and had more interest in the advertising side and switched to media buying. She soon got a job at CBS Fox Video, then the largest home video company as Blockbuster and VHS rentals were "exploding."

"I was put behind a spreadsheet and analyzing sales and forecasting what 'Star Wars' did in Japan versus the U.K.," she said. "I had a great boss. He knew my background and he said he could really see me rising in the ranks. He told me to go back to school to get an MBA and the company would pay 100%. They also paid for my books. But out of sheer boredom as a people person who was just crunching numbers all day, I would always make my way to the PR depart-