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BUSINESS GUIDE

How to Become a Rockstar CFO

Top ways to raise your profile from author
Jack McCullough and personal branding experts

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How to Become a Rockstar CFO

Top ways to raise your profile from author Jack McCullough and personal branding experts

Some executives want to be go-to sources for the media or industry peers. Some want to land consulting engagements, speak at conferences, or write articles or books. Others want to be courted by top companies and have their choice of plum jobs.

All of the above are possible for finance professionals, and you don't even need to be particularly extroverted, much less a natural-born writer or orator. You just need some moxie and a plan.

Stacey Moore, who worked with the former CFO of Uber US, says the first step is to shape your personal brand — and in fact, that's something all finance executives need to think about.

"If you're a CFO, you have a personal brand," said Jack McCullough, CFO Leadership Council founder and president and author of *Secrets of Rockstar CFOs*. "You can define it or you can let other people define it."

His advice: Decide how you want to be seen professionally, and show up in the world with that persona.

Personal branding begins with defining and communicating your identity. And for controllers or other finance professionals seeking entry to the C-suite, this is a good time for a branding and visibility campaign. Among the 264 CFOs hired by Fortune 500 companies in the first half of 2022, 33% were first-time candidates, per the new CFO Movement Study from Cowen Partners Executive Research. So there's room to move up.

Branding specialist Hinge Marketing [uses a personal brand visibility ladder](#), starting at "resident expert" and rising to "global superstars" who can command high speaking and consulting fees. How high? Clients will pay \$240 hourly for a resident expert, says Hinge. The average for superstars: \$1,357 per hour, in Hinge's experience.

Back at the day job, PayScale says CFO salaries range from \$80,000 to \$275,000 and up. Guess which executives command the "and up" band?

"There was a day, and it wasn't that long ago, that simply being really good at your job was your brand," said McCullough. "There's just so much more to it now because the role is so much more visible."

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Define Your Personal Brand

Executive branding coach Carol Kaemmerer, president and principal at Kaemmerer Group and author of *LinkedIn for the Savvy Executive*, has worked with a number of finance pros and always starts with a written statement that serves as a roadmap.

“I ask them two very specific branding questions,” said Kaemmerer. “They are, ‘What are the three things you want to be known for?’ And then, ‘What are your differentiators?’”

She recently worked with a VP of finance who wanted to be — and now is — a CFO and advised him to craft a statement describing how a finance department under his leadership would look from a cultural perspective.

“He wanted to be known for things that you would not necessarily associate with a CFO,” she said. “For example, staff development was a hallmark of his past experience. He always treated his employees incredibly well and helped them climb their ladders.”

Kaemmerer offers three guiding principles that will make your statement stand out.

1. **Craft a bold, authentic lead** that expresses your current reality plus three things you are or want to be known for.
2. **Address the three Ps:** your purpose, passion, and principles.
 - **Purpose:** Share your gifts and how you like to lead. “I am a trusted adviser to line-of-business peers,” shows that you’re not just about counting paper clips. You have helped turn a business vision into reality.
 - **Passion:** This is often related to your vertical. Don’t be too abstract. It’s fine to wax on about what you love about manufacturing or professional services. “Built a finance team that, when a customer need

surfaces, is ready to move quickly and decisively to support a new product.”

- **Principles:** Values beget culture. Be specific, and bring receipts. It’s one thing to say you value diversity. It’s another to write, “Invested three years as chair of my company’s DEI committee.”
3. **Be authentic and transparent.** Don’t chase buzzwords. There’s only one you, so be honest about your goals, skills, and the “three Ps,” and you’ll attract those who want what you bring to the table.

Side bonus: Kaemmerer sees a direct connection between a strong personal brand statement and hiring and retaining finance staff.

“People are drawn to openness and authenticity,” she said. “It attracts the employees that you want to work with, and it retains those people who are maybe thinking, ‘Well, now that there’s a new person, maybe I should leave.’ People are more likely to give the new guy a chance when he’s telling you right from the beginning how he’s going to conduct himself.”

Be bold in putting your statement together, and seek help from a coach or mentor, if for nothing else than a reality check. The now-CFO that she advised found a great fit in a company that valued his expansive view of the role.

“He didn’t want to be pigeonholed as just doing finance,” she said. “When you express your brand authentically, you will attract the people who find that attractive.”

McCullough adds that surveys show the CFO is often the “conscience” of the company, and it’s critically important to take that seriously and make sure your track record of ethical leadership comes through.

“Who is the most trusted executive in your company?” he said. “In most cases, it’s the CFO. So that’s part of your brand too.”

6 Pillars of a Personal Brand



“Standing out in your industry can feel like it will take a lot of time and effort,” said Sophie Milliken, founder and CEO at Moja Group, a consultancy that works with entrepreneurs and senior executives to amplify their personal profiles. “It will. But it will be completely worth it.”

A business rockstar’s brand, said Milliken, rests on six pillars: networking, authority, awards and recognitions, speaking, media/press, and online visibility.

Introverts may be cringing. You can downplay public speaking, but networking and some sort of thought leadership aren’t negotiable for rockstar finance executives, says McCullough, given the CFO’s mandate as a strategic leader.

Pillar #1 – Networking

Network building can and should happen organically on the job, via mentoring, customer meetings, and talking to investors or board members. Attend events online or in person and while there, make it a point to connect with influential people in your industry.

Pillar #2 – Authority

Blogs and articles help brand you as an expert, and it's easier than you may think to get published in trade journals, as we'll discuss. Overall, be a resource and helper. Offer your expertise to peers, customers, journalists, those entering your vertical or field, and people you meet on airplanes. You never know.

Pillar #3 – Awards and recognitions

Winning or even being shortlisted for industry awards creates instant credibility. You can use award badges on your website and in your email signature and benefit from any social media and press coverage.

Finding and applying for awards can be time consuming, so engaging a freelance PR professional might be worthwhile. These experts can also help you find expert commentary and speaking ops, ghost write content, manage social profiles, and more. Expect to pay between \$25 and \$100 per hour, depending on the person's expertise.

Pillar #4 – Speaking engagements

These can take the form of being a podcast guest or speaking at conferences. McCullough regularly engages speakers for the CFO Leadership Council and has specific things he looks for, as we'll discuss.

Pillar #5 – Media and press

Being on the radio or TV as an expert or being quoted in the press deliver credibility and, again, create social content along with search presence for your name. If you lack a marketing professional or coach, you'll need to hone your pitching skills to show why you are the best person to contribute, and you will need to be organized — requests for expert comments usually come with deadlines.

McCullough says above all, be responsive.

"Never say no," he said. "If for some reason you have to go off the record, that's fine because I think that the person doing the interview is still likely to appreciate it."

And assume there is a short-fuse deadline.

"One [reporter] sent me a message through LinkedIn, and I was on a plane," said McCullough. "He said, 'I have to get this done today.' And I said, 'Look, I'm on a plane. If you want to give me written questions, I'll do my best to explain, or here is some contact information for a couple of other people to reach out to.'"

Pillar #6 – Online presence

All these pillars come together to create your personal brand and define what you'll become known for.

"You are what Google says you are, so share the outputs of all the above components far and wide through your own and your company's social media," says Milliken. "Tag relevant people in posts where appropriate, and then be prepared to hear from and engage people who want to know more."

For those seeking to move into the CFO role, focus on respected journals, volunteer to speak at an industry conference like those McCullough organizes, or get involved in leadership in a state association of CFOs or controllers — any org that will put you front and center and give you a chance to show what you know.

Learn More

- **[Guide to Getting Press Coverage.](#)** Sure, you can spend thousands to get media attention. Or, you can use these tips to earn coverage and build lasting relationships.
- **[A Crash Course in Branded Podcasts.](#)** Successful branded podcasts require an active marketing database and social media following. That audience doesn't have to be big, but it needs to be solid enough to build upon.

CHAPTER 3

How to Achieve Rock Stardom in Your Current Role

It's a Catch-22: The CFO title at a cool or prominent company gets noticed. But how do you get that title without industry recognition?

The answer is a mix of killing it in your current role, engaging on LinkedIn, the above steps to build your profile, and a portfolio of external recognition.

For the latter, Kaemmerer advises her clients to become sources on Qwoted, ProfNet, and Help a Reporter Out, aka HARO. All these sites connect reporters from a variety of outlets with experts. As with awards, you could DIY it, but PR experts generally get better results.

Experts recommend following your passion. McCullough launched the [CFO Leadership Council](#), a professional association with chapters all over the country that empowers senior financial executives to realize success in their careers, as a side project nights and weekends. It's since helped hundreds of finance executives reach their potential and enabled him to provide speaking opportunities while framing him as an authority.

Pro tip: Offer to speak internally wherever and whenever you can, write for your internal blog, and then branch out. Your CMO will be happy to hear, "I'm able to represent the company. Get me plugged in, and let me talk about how well this business is run."



Going Big League

“To gain a wider industry profile, you have to show online, on LinkedIn usually, that you have something to say,” said Kaemmerer.

In fact, McCullough swears by LinkedIn.

“I think it’s fair to say my company was built on LinkedIn,” he said. “I’d connect to several hundred CFOs in New York, say what I’m doing, you want to connect with me, I can share information with you. Boom. That’s how I did it.”

Again, as with writing a personal statement, there are plenty of guides on how to build a LinkedIn presence, but Kaemmerer has some guiding principles:

- **Post conversation starters**, which LinkedIn defines in its algorithm as five words or more.

“So, ‘Great article, Joel!’ doesn’t count — you want to say why,” she says. “Carrying half of the conversation allows the person who wrote the article to engage with you.”

- **Stay aligned with your brand identity.** Say you’re all about helping your company’s salespeople succeed. Find a few sales experts on LinkedIn who strike you as smart, and jump in with finance insights. Maybe you can discuss how sales models should change as buying behavior evolves, or what KPIs help uncover the actual profitability of a sale.
- **Don’t go dark.** Building a following is work. It takes time, consistent effort, and grit. Do you have what it takes to come up with content and ideas week after week, month after month? If you want to cultivate a following, you need to do just that.

Do You Need to Move?

McCullough says he built both his network and range of experience by working as an outsourced CFO. And in fact, today, staying with one company too long can be seen as a negative for finance professionals.

“Say, 15 years, that used to be considered loyal, right?” he said. “But now, not so much. Unless the company went through a lot of evolutions, you’re perceived as not having developed a really good set of skills along the way. And you probably don’t have much of a network, either.”

Top employers would rather hire somebody who, during those same 15 years, worked for different companies and developed a broad skill set.

“If you’re 15 years in, well, you’ve maybe worked for seven or eight different CEOs, many different chief marketing officers, chief sales officers, several different boards of directors,” he said. That enriches your skillset and network.

“Things that are executed by the person themselves are always more authentic to that person,” Kaemmerer said. “But what I really am hoping for is to instill in my clients the sense of responsibility for following the people who are important to their success.”

Following is the first step in building a broad, diverse, vibrant network.

Pro tip: Consider pre-writing and staging articles for busy times, like the end of the month when you’re closing, for example.

The good news for those with zero interest in spending a lot of time on social media is that LinkedIn is sufficient for professionals, says McCullough.

Keep your profile current — monthly or quarterly, update your qualifications and certifications, awards, work projects, speaking engagements, board or charitable undertakings, mentorships, and any role or title changes.

Courtesy is a differentiator. Respond to all legitimate inquiries. Even if a role isn’t of interest, calling or emailing the recruiter back creates a positive impression.

“It is impossible to be on the cutting edge of your profession in a cocoon,” said McCullough.



Writing Is for Left Brain People, Too

“Thought leadership is really about sharing a different take on things that are helpful to your audience. Not all thought leaders are contrarians; some have a certain niche that they focus on. Maybe you’re a CFO who works with high-growth companies. Whatever the case, find a focus that fits your particular style. That’s how you say something that’s meaningful enough that people invite you to write or speak about it.”

Stacey Moore

Can’t commit to writing regularly? Consider owning a niche. For example, every July, McCullough writes a book review.

“It’s the CFO summer reading list,” he said. “I get a lot of authors and publishers reaching out to me when they see it.”

That effort checks a lot of boxes: The article serves his CFO audience, it gets attention from PR professionals looking to get visibility for their authors, and it builds his professional network by including other CFO authors and business writers.

Once you have your focus, it’s time to find an industry site or journal that accepts guest content.

How to break into writing in 6 steps

“Amelia Earhart wasn’t a businessperson, but she had one of my favorite quotes that’s applicable in business,” said McCullough. “The best way to do it is to do it.”

So get started. The more you write, the easier it becomes.

To raise your profile:

1. **Study the publication and its audience.** Do you see bylined guest posts from people in your role? Are its readers the people you want to see you as a rockstar?
2. **Send a [great pitch email](#) and abstract with an introduction.** Make the pitch targeted and relevant to the audience, original in relation to the site and covering something you don’t see already, scoped to deliver useful information in 750 to 1,000 words, and timely. Tie-ins to trends or current events are attractive to editors.
3. **Be open to feedback** and willing to adjust the abstract, and don’t take rejection personally. Sometimes editors are just too busy to take on a new contributor. Ask if you can circle back in a month or two.
4. **Be dependable.** Deliver copy when promised. Consider paying a freelance copy editor if you don’t feel comfortable with your mechanics.
5. **Don’t make the editor work extra.** Include your byline as you want it to appear, a professional headshot, a bio, info on your company, and your social links without having to be asked.
6. **Follow up.** Watch for requests for clarification and respond promptly. When the story is published, socialize it, and thank the editor.

The content monster always needs to be fed, and rockstars always have something to say. Plus, writing prolifically can lead to speaking, especially if the publication also has an event.

How to break into public speaking in 4 steps

1. **Look to your vendors.** Companies like NetSuite, which runs SuiteWorld, often book finance pros who are open to sharing success stories that highlight how their product or service helped the business succeed. There's no better advocate than a happy customer.

Similarly, if your company holds events, even roadshows or lunch and learns, offer to teach customers something they may not know about finance. Make sure it's recorded.
2. **Share your success.** Set up a "My Speaking" page on your website or LinkedIn profile. Embed any video of you speaking, even on Zoom, and include your bio, topics you can address, venues of talks you've given, your local area, and contact information.
3. **Get recommended.** If you have a contact who speaks, ask for an introduction. Groups like [Innovation Women](#), a bureau that helps female professionals build their brands, or [WiseHer](#), which provides access to experts, can broker opportunities.
4. **Have a fresh idea that delivers ROI for the event.** Think about what will make your pitch appeal to the person booking speakers. Who is the audience? What are the tracks? What hasn't been covered in the past few shows that should be? Pitch that.

McCullough books speakers for CFO Leadership Council events and says there's a process.

"I start with subject matter expertise," he said. That may be demonstrated by the person's writing or LinkedIn connections or by a recommendation within his network. Next, he looks for a video of the person speaking.

"There are a lot of people that know the material, but they're not engaging public speakers," he said. McCullough often brings in authors for his events, purchasing books in exchange for the speaking gig. The author agrees to do a book signing, which expands everyone's network.



Rockstars Hire Smart

“Everyone I interviewed for the [*Rockstar CFOs*] book, and good CFOs in general, have really good controllers,” McCullough said. “They make the trains run on time so the CFO doesn’t have to. The CFO can work on the strategic stuff, they can go on customer visits, they can build relationships.”

A great staff makes any leader look good, and the right technology is essential for hiring and retaining top people and building a reputation for excellence.

Take communication and collaboration, two skills some finance pros struggle with. When your entire business runs on a single platform, it’s easy to see what others

are working on and how their efforts might impact joint initiatives. A unified source of data insights, like NetSuite ERP, makes it easy to spot areas of overlap, sparking more communication and collaboration.

Consider projects that might involve purchase orders, contracts, and customer records, all of which cross over multiple departments. When finance has deeper insight, that increases the chance your team will head off problems, which results in finance becoming more embedded in the business and the CFO becoming a trusted resource for other teams, someone peers can go to with questions or for feedback.

“Think of yourself as an enterprise-wise executive, who happens to be a financial expert,” said McCullough. “It is a mindset shift that will pay dividends.”



4 Ways Rockstar CFOs Move Their Careers Forward

One top CFO recruitment firm says it finds candidates via “professional groups and organizations, select social media sites, information from financial publications and websites and just a few secrets of our own.”

We'll bet those secret methods include both social algorithms that identify active finance professionals who demonstrate engagement and expertise that matches what the hiring company is seeking and recruiters who maintain Rolodexes of former clients and industry leaders, to whom they reach out for referrals.

Thought leadership and networking, check and check.

McCullough says in-demand executives who get hired for top jobs share four common traits:

1. **They take an active instead of reactive stance**, know the mission and objectives of the company, and balance long-term strategy with short-term need. They view their role as a mandate to make things happen, rather than just report on past events.
2. **They embrace ethical leadership**. Rockstar CFOs create a culture where ethics matter, lead by example, and provide full and accurate disclosures of relevant information. They're known as being committed to compliance and integrity. He says nothing will sink a promising career faster than being seen as willing to cut corners.

Learn More

- **4 Skills CFOs Need Now**. The CFO's job is no longer just about the numbers; soft skills are more in demand than ever. In this business guide, you'll find tips from top CFOs who excel at communication, collaboration, data analysis, and FP&A.
- **Good to Great: CFO's Guide to Closing the Skills Gap**. Some CFOs are natural number crunchers. Others revel in staff development, product brainstorming, and liaising with business colleagues. Here's how to recognize what job functions you're good at, then use that insight to capitalize on your strong points.
- **How 3 CFOs Are Growing Their Careers and Companies**. As the CFO role continues to evolve, three top executives reveal their biggest priorities over the next few years and challenges they're currently facing.



3. They are right there in the thick of both major and minor transactions, like M&A and joint ventures. From the start, they proactively identify risks and opportunities. And they aren't afraid to stand firm and tap into a bit of traditional baseball wisdom: "Sometimes the best deals are the ones you don't make."
4. They build all-star teams. Because a company is constantly changing, you need to, paraphrasing Wayne Gretzky via McCullough, "build your team for where you want to go, not where you are today."

Prioritize passion, intellectual curiosity, work ethic, and a willingness to learn over technical or vertical-specific skills that can be taught.

Finally, Milliken says that with rockstar status comes power and influence as well as scrutiny. How will you pay it forward?

"Consider joining a charity board as an advisor or trustee," she said. "Or look at taking on a nonexecutive director role for another business. You'll meet interesting people and learn from board colleagues."

