Many of us are hampered in advancing our careers because of our difficulty with self-promotion. We were brought up in the days when professionals such as doctors and lawyers bridled at the thought of advertising or marketing. We have acquired values through socialization and unconscious learning that tell us that self-promotion is shameless and in poor taste, is egocentric, and that certainly it is not “professional” to toot your own horn. This cultural message is even stronger for those, especially women, who grew up in a non-U.S. culture.

Another cultural factor affecting women is that described by Deborah Tannen: Women primarily conduct “relationship talk,” while men cultivate “report talk.” Women need to become comfortable with report talk. These cultural messages lead to an “internal glass ceiling” that is dangerous to your career advancement health. Adrian Savage concludes that those who have less motivation to work within the current power culture that exists put themselves at disadvantage. Your task is to develop a graceful style of self-promotion that fits you. Maybe when you are famous, others will do this for you. But, as James Lang says, “Until then, I can see only one candidate for the job of…self-promoting me.”

So, how do you gracefully, rather than shamelessly, promote yourself? Here are 12 tips.

1. Make a habit of recognizing and praising the accomplishments of others. One of the best ways around having to self-promote is for others to do it for you. Develop strategic partnerships with your colleagues, and promote each other’s accomplishments. Men do this all the time, while women are better at supporting others, and so on.

2. Be sensitive to timing. A graceful self-or other-promoter knows that promotion is a delicate art, and looks for the best opportunity. This is often in an informal setting—connecting before or after a committee meeting, quick e-mail, and so on.

3. View talking about yourself (or others) as educating or teaching others, rather than “selling.” This is a powerful mindset change that all professionals can use. We are very comfortable and often passionate about teaching others about our discipline. And this is really what you are doing when you tell people that you gave a talk on “XYZ.” You want them to share your enthusiasm and joy at the talk you gave, or what you learned about public speaking that could help them.

4. Develop an interesting story around the facts. Remember the old saying, “Facts tell; stories sell.” In graceful self-promotion, you can offer useful conversation or anecdotes that include your accomplishments rather than explicitly selling yourself. Develop a story around what the issue was, what you did, and what the outcome was. For example, in talking to your department chair, “I know we’re trying to reach a goal of $5 for this year in grant awards. I’ve just learned that we got a 9th percentile on the grant on ABC. This is the great idea that we had, and submitted last year, and it was almost triaged out because it went to a study sec-

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CAREER WATCH

Graceful Self-Promotion—It’s Essential

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tion that did not have the proper back-
ground. But my colleagues, Jim and
Mary and I, persevered, and rewrote to
ensure it got to the right study section,
and we’re so glad we did!”

5. Remember, your success makes
your unit look good. Present your
accomplishments in that vein. Show that your
accomplishments are closely aligned
with your unit’s and organization’s goals.
For example, “I just got the paper on
XYZ accepted in ZYX; so that’s another
peer-reviewed publication in a top jour-
nal for this year’s departmental list!”

6. Keep your boss in the
information loop, in a timely
manner. Do not wait until
your annual review! You
want your boss to have as
many good things as possi-
ble to report to the higher-ups and your
results are part of those. You never know
when your boss might have an opportu-
nity to use the facts. For example, “You
know, Dean Jones, we’ve just gotten
another grant for $5. You said that when
we reached this $5 goal, you would find
more space that we could continue to
grow our productivity.”

"Make a habit of recognizing
and praising the
accomplishments of others.”

7. Practice graceful self-promotion to
avoid “credit theft.” The best way to avoid
letting someone else get the credit (and
you become resentful) is to make sure
that the proper people know what you
have accomplished. Maintain frequent
informal contact (e-mail, hallway conver-
sations, quick chats at meetings, etc.).

8. Don’t be stingy with your informa-
tion. You never know how your success
can help someone. For example, your
junior colleague might say to you, “You
just got a grant through the ABC Foun-
dation? I’ve been trying to write a grant
for them. Can you tell me what you
think the important factors were?”

9. Report the publication, grant, or
presentation in the local institutional
newspaper. You never know what inter-
esting connections, opportunities, and

collaborations can arise. I rou-
tinely look at our internal col-
lege and university publication
to see what others are doing and
how that might relate to what
we are doing.

10. Remember, you serve as a role
model to others in your field. By publici-
zizing what you’ve accomplished, you
enable many people you do not know to
see it. Then, they see what you can
achieve, and are encouraged to stay with
the academic career.

11. Make sure key people “know what
you’ve done for them lately.” Remember,
no one will know what you’ve done if you
don’t let it be known. They cannot read
your mind! And these days, with the
short attention spans of overwhelmed
leaders, they need concrete (and suc-
cinct) reminders of what you’ve done.
This is particularly important when orga-
nizations change; it’s highly likely that
not all the new leaders and colleagues are
readily aware of your portfolio of skills
and accomplishments. Recognize that
part of your job is educating the new
leaders to know who you are, and what
you provide to the organization. Accept
that this is a new cost of doing business
in our fast-changing world.

12. Take credit gracefully. DO NOT
diminish it by minimizing. When you
minimize your accomplishments (“I was
just lucky”), you not only hurt yourself,
but you also diminish the complimentor
by dismissing that person’s compliment.
Graciously accept the praise, and expand
with one of your anecdotes that shows
you really heard the person and are
appreciative, and that you were an
important contributor. For example,
“Thank you. It was exhilarating to see
that our year of hard work came to
fruition this way.”

Another way you can increase your
positive visibility is to praise upward
when appropriate. It is amazing how lit-
tle praise bosses get. So you are likely to
be remembered positively when you can
honestly praise your boss (or other lead-
ers) for specific accomplishments or
actions. This is a version of the apprecia-
tive approach; you praise the behavior
you want to amplify.

Here are some special examples of
self-promotion in written documents.
❖ Dossier for promotion and tenure.
❖ Grant proposals, book proposals, and
any documents where you are trying
to persuade people to a point of view
in your favor.
❖ Letters of recommendation that your
boss asks you to draft for him or her.

These self-evaluation materials are a
very important place to let people know
what you have done, where you want to
grow, and where you believe you can
contribute in the future. This is not a
place to be shy and retiring. You can’t
count on all of the review committee
members to know you well, and what
they do not know can definitely hurt
you. It often helps to get the assistance
of others in reviewing these to make sure
that you strike the right tone of graceful
self-promotion and do not inadvertently
put yourself down. ❖

Some material for this column came from:
❖ James Lang, Chronicle of Higher
❖ Savage, The Internal Glass Ceiling,
PNA Incorporated; this White Paper
and others are available from
Martine Berreitter. 949-472-3117, or
martine.berreitter@netips.com.
❖ Tom Krattenmaker, Do they know
what you’ve done for them lately?
❖ Gail Evans, She Wins, You Win, New