

## CAREER WATCH

## Graceful Self-Promotion—It's Essential

BY PAGE S. MORAHAN, PHD

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

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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 other women in times of crisis than in publicly recognizing achievements and joyfully sharing their success. However, this tactic can be equally successful for everyone.

**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 commit-

tee 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 \$\$ 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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tion that did not have the proper background. 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 journal 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 possible to report to the higher-ups and your results are part of those. You never know when your boss might have an opportunity to use the facts. For example, "You know, Dean Jones, we've just gotten another grant for \$\$\$. You said that when we reached this \$\$\$ goal, you would find more space so 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 conversations, quick chats at meetings, etc.).

**8. Don't be stingy with your information.** 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 Foundation? 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 interesting connections, opportunities, and



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collaborations can arise. I routinely look at our internal college 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 publicizing 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 succinct) reminders of what you've done. This is particularly important when organizations 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 little praise bosses get. So you are likely to be remembered positively when you can honestly praise your boss (or other leaders) for specific accomplishments or actions. This is a version of the appreciative 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 Education*, C4, September 12, 2003.
- ❖ Savage, *The Internal Glass Ceiling*, PNA Incorporated; this *White Paper and others* are available from Martine Berreitter, 949-472-3117, or [martine.berreitter@nettps.com](mailto:martine.berreitter@nettps.com).
- ❖ Tom Krattenmaker, *Do they know what you've done for them lately?* Harvard Business Review, 2003.
- ❖ Gail Evans, *She Wins, You Win*, New York: Gotham Press, 2003.