

Guerrilla Self-Promotion

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Don't laugh at my title--this column is *not* going to be about apes who enjoy talking about themselves. Instead, I'm going to tell you about aspects of *human* nature--ideas that you may find uncomfortable at first. That's because these ideas may contradict some of your training from the world of academia. First, I want to talk about the fear of self-promotion, and then we can discuss why the old adage that "good science will always sell itself" doesn't really work in practice.

The term "guerrilla" (as opposed to gorilla) has been liberally used over the last few years to mean "a modest effort." Books such as *Guerrilla Marketing* have popularized the concept of managing a large-company public appearance for some very small companies. Similarly, I think it is important to have a marketing campaign for your career. But in the world of science, there are some large issues that will confront a scientist who attempts to do this. In particular, many people in the academic community believe it is inappropriate to mix self-promotion with science.

But is it? This may still be a hot topic for debate. But on a more personal level, I can tell you that the fear of self-promotion will definitely keep you from advancing as fast as you otherwise might.

Let's start with a good definition from behavioral scientist George W. Dudley, who along with his partner Shannon Goodson has written the book [*Are You Earning What You Are Worth?*](#)

"The fear of self promotion consists of all behavioral habits, thoughts, actions, or feelings, which conspire to keep competent people of all walks of life from being able to stand up and take credit for who they are and what they do well."

In other words, no matter how strong your technical abilities may be, they won't advance your career unless others are aware of them. You may not be comfortable with slick advice about how to advance a career by "stroking" those around you, and I don't intend to lead you in that direction. However, we all know how important it is to have the support and respect of co-workers and the boss. If you are the sort of person who can't express your strengths to those around you, then you will definitely be held back by those who can.

Does the Best Scientist Always Get the Job?

Self-promotion and salesmanship are very closely related. Think about the people who have left your laboratory and gone on to successful careers. Have they always been the "best person for the job?" Or, have you discovered (as I have) that they are consistently the best at the *process of getting the job*? This process, to a certain extent, relies on salesmanship--even though many people react negatively to that word.

What do you think of when you think of salesmanship? Used cars? Or that lab-supplies rep who has the unusual ability to clear the lab when he or she is spotted in the hallway? Well, the talent we are referring to has *nothing* to do with those examples. This isn't the unethical, "sleaze" approach to selling yourself. This is simply doing everything that you possibly can to be in the right place at the right time. It is a matter of positioning.

Positioning Yourself for Career Success

"Positioning" is another word stolen from the lexicon of the professional marketer. It refers to educating the public about the strengths of a given product; in other words, to see that the product is placed in the proper perspective for the consumer in a world of competitive products. A Mercedes-Benz is "positioned" as a luxury-class vehicle of outstanding quality, and it says something about the lifestyle of its owner. Advertising agencies work long and hard to put this simple picture into our minds.

Similarly, we need to consider how we position ourselves in the incredibly competitive world of life sciences employment. Have you positioned yourself as a "Molecular Biologist" when your competitor for the same job has positioned herself as a "Molecular Biologist With Computational Chemistry Experience"? In a world of CVs where so many look the same, that additional positioning may be just what is required to get that person noticed.

This brings to light some of the subtle ways that self-promotion and positioning can aid a job search. Should one present a traditional academic CV in response to an industry ad in *Science* for which 200 others are going to apply as well? Not if you want to get hired, you don't. Unless your stellar abilities shine through by association with Nobel laureate advisers, a purely academic document doesn't do the job most of the time. While this is not a résumé-writing column, my belief is that proper self-promotion begins by reorganizing the way you present your data on a CV.

Here's an example of what I mean. Look at the following descriptions of two people, and decide which of these sounds like someone you'd most like to meet:

- **Person A: Intelligent, Sensitive, Hard-Working, Envious, Crafty**
- **Person B: Envious, Crafty, Sensitive, Hard-Working, Intelligent**

C'mon, admit it. Before you figured out that they were identical lists, didn't you think that Person A sounded a lot more like someone you could associate with? This is due to what Dr. William Lareau, author of [Conduct Expected](#), calls "the Primacy Effect." "Human beings have a marked tendency to attach extra significance or weight to information that arrives first," he says. With that proven time and time again, it baffles me why CVs arrive in my office daily with the important information buried somewhere in the back--because tradition says to put the name of spouse and children at the front.

In Conclusion

Although I never want to be accused of making snap judgments, I have found that I can usually guess at how an interview will go based on my review of a CV and the first telephone conversation with a candidate. If in that brief meeting a person has difficulty telling me what it is that they do well, with a few relevant accomplishments, then I can make an assumption that even with preparation they will have the same difficulty when sitting in front of our hiring manager.

What can you do to overcome this fear of self-promotion? Begin by developing a thorough understanding of your own abilities and past accomplishments. Take a close look at your CV and determine just how you are positioning yourself against the competition. Remember that few situations in a scientist's life require salesmanship in the way that the job search does!

Future columns in "Tooling Up" will give you exercises to take home and think about that will aid you in knowing yourself better. People who know their strengths well are infinitely better at presenting these when the right opportunity arises.

REFERENCES

G. W. Dudley and S. L. Goodson, *Are You Earning What You Are Worth?* (Behavioral Sciences Research Press, Dallas TX 75234, 1995).

W. Lareau, *Conduct Expected* (New Win Publishing Inc., Clinton, NJ 08809, 1985).