Toot your horn – An Insider’s Insight into self-promotion and dissemination activities

Long gone are the days of the lone investigator who discovered a new scientific truth, published the finding in a journal and simply returned to their bench research. We are living in the Information Age – a world where the internet, computers and smartphones are an essential part of our everyday lives, allowing us to immediately access and share information. Digital technologies have changed every aspect of our lives – from the way we work and learn to the way we play and socialise.

The internet has transformed how scientific findings are communicated and data shared. Technological capabilities are advancing faster than our ability to comprehend their full potential. Here, the Niche Science & Technology team describe some of the key terms that will help you understand the process of self-promotion and summarise a few approaches and tools you can employ to promote your science (and yourself).
Before you start

- Identify your speciality subjects and your target audience
- Decide on your level of investment – time, budget, resource, scope, involvement etc.
- Set yourself a feasible target/goal and map out milestones
- Build a network – join groups and editorial boards, support others

Prepare to succeed

- Create useful stuff and share what you have and what you know in various formats
- Collaborate with different groups and enlist supporters for your activities
- Become a channel – share content through LinkedIn, websites, social media, blogs, forums and discussion groups
- Keep a record of your activities and measure your progress/success

Key Insights

People working in the sciences aren’t generally perceived as being outgoing. Many would agree that scientists can often be introverted, bookish and perhaps even a bit awkward. However, some scientists seem to be more outgoing, finding it easier to get noticed, promote themselves and thrive in today’s media-driven culture. If you want to be heard over the noise you need to engage with the process of tooting your own horn (no one is going to do it for you).

Mastering the art of marketing yourself is particularly important for those that don’t have an established ‘reputation’. For example, young scientists with limited networks trying to kick-off their careers. It can equally apply for new research projects and/or teams promising important findings that will need broad dissemination and recognition when they come to fruition.

Ways can be found for unassuming and self-effacing scientists to compete successfully with their more loquacious counterparts through the cultivation of a few simple activities [1]. By seeing self-promotion as a scientific challenge that needs to be addressed in a logical and step-wise fashion you can achieve a level of recognition that may not reflect your personality.

Beware the bubble

The concept of the filter bubble has emerged with the rise of social media. The idea is that internet search algorithms selectively provide you with the material they determine you would ‘like’ to see – and that is based on your past searches. As such, it is most likely that the data you see has been filtered and you run the risk of becoming separated from information being shared by those that (perhaps) do not share your cultural or ideological beliefs. This has always existed as we tend to self-select our networks (both directly and indirectly). But in the world of self-promotion you need to be aware of the bubble and always consider how you can reach beyond the scope of your current influence.
What is your brand?

Before you can start tooting-your-horn you will need a brand, an ‘image’ that you want the outside world to see. The act of associating a product or service with a particular brand has infused all facets of everyday life. In successful cases we associate the brand with an ‘identity’ that embodies a set of expectations and perceptions that the brand’s ‘owner’ has engineered into the popular psyche. In the case of yourself, your team or your research programme your brand may, for example, focus on a scientific objective, leadership in a field or service you are providing. A brand needs to be believable and achievable. You should base your brand on a ‘position’ you already hold or on a specific ambition you have been working towards. Cultivating your ‘promise’ helps your peers develop expectations about your brand.

You should be able to capture the brand concept within a single minded proposition (SMP) that can ignite partners, inform briefs and serve as a rallying cry for all your communications. With some application the brand should effectively emerge as a persona with specific and consistent characteristics. It may encompass a visual identity or logo that your target audience can connect with (see Visual identity) and have a snappy name.

Share of voice

Along with the firmly held belief that all scientists are introverts, is the widespread myth among scientists that they work in a meritocracy. Many young scientists think that they simply need to do good research and recognition will follow. This just doesn’t happen in the current media-driven environment (it probably never did). Clearly, social communication skills, such as the ability to speak well in public, play an important factor on the road to success (and it will probably remain so) but in the current environment other factors come into play. These influential tools are readily available to the introverted, the modest and the anxious.

For a truly competitive edge in promotion it’s important to understand and use the concept of ‘share of voice’. Simply stated, share of voice is about your slice of the pie. When utilising electronic media to overcome a nascent network or shyness it equates to that percentage of the digital space that you can corner. How much of all online content and conversation is from or about your project? In a digital environment, there are more competitors and more channels than you can imagine. It’s important to consider all the different platforms and how you might engage with them.

Winning share of voice is an on going process that burns time and resources. You need to identify the specific issues you are going to focus on (scope) and how much effort (resource) you are prepared to commit. With the fast moving nature of information technology your efforts of engaging should be at least daily. Your own vehicles will serve as the means by which you can communicate your key messages. However, you must be team player, enlisting other ‘like-minded’ individuals and ‘content creators’ to support our cause.

Understanding the four terms below is crucial to the success of your share of voice activities:

- **Key messages** – the points you want to communicate to your audience based on your findings, conclusions and opinions
- **Vehicles** – these are products (press releases, interviews, journals etc.) that communicate your key messages
- **Channels** – these are the different forms of communication (Twitter, LinkedIn, radio) you can use to disseminate your messages
- **Networks** – people who should be interested in your work and can further distribute your vehicles to other like-minded individuals
Key messaging

Messaging describes who you are and what you are trying to achieve. It should communicate the key points you want to emphasise when you reach out to your audience. The message should always tie back to your brand.

Different messages can be developed for different purposes and audiences, such as speeches, fundraising campaigns or presentations. You should craft a set of short, standard phrases or paragraphs to describe your organisation, program or service. When you reach out to specific audiences, implement new campaigns or communicate programs, you will have the language ready. A well-crafted message will highlight your unique benefits, engage your target audience, support your mission and often include a call to action. To develop messages that motivate and excite an audience you should consider what you want people to know about your organisation and your cause. What do you want them to say about you? What do you want them to do?

- Develop core messages that connect the dots between what you do and how it relates to your audience. Ensure that the messages tie into your single minded proposition
- Keep language simple and use analogies or personal stories to get your point across
- Make your messages believable and provide evidence to increase credibility
- Be consistent with delivery
- Ensure that each message reflects your brand – that is, who you are

Highlight what is relevant to the issue and your audience, but be sure to include a consistent statement about yourself or your organisation. This makes your messaging memorable and helps position you in the market and in the minds of your audience. Finally, remember that messaging changes over time – conceptualise how your ‘brand’ or your project may mature and adapt your messages to facilitate its development.

Visual identity

A few scientists have been able to capture their own image within their brand (Einstein, Darwin, etc.). With time and perseverance you may be able to achieve this for yourself but a visual identity is perhaps more important for project teams and collaborations. This is usually achieved through the use of a logo which is projected and supported internally and externally in varied forms such as letterheads, brochures and newsletters.

The logo often forms an important part of a visual identity, but it is only a part. A logo is often combined with typefaces and other design elements to create a visual identity that is recognisable and memorable. A professionally managed visual identity integrates with other aspects of branding to support and project the brand as it evolves. Consistent and strategic use of the logo helps build confidence and trust in the brand.
Vehicles

Once you have your scientific publications and you know what material is available to exploit you can look at how to maximise its dissemination value. When you leave the restrictions of the academic arena, exploitation follows three simple rules: re-use, recycle and repurpose. When you are working with partners you can also add co-creation (working together to produce specific products like white papers and opinion pieces). Another frequently used term is up-cycling: also known as creative reuse, it is the process of transforming by-products of your work and unwanted materials such as rejected manuscripts into new content better fit for purpose of message communication in one or other channels.

You need to establish certain thresholds for your activities (or risk spreading your resources too thinly). Define which vehicles you expect to create from your exploitable products, and which channels you want to use to share these vehicles (to disseminate your messages). These can include:

- Institution news, newsletter
- Press releases and interviews
- Blog pieces, commentaries and opinions
- Website updates

Allocate an appropriate time/resource budget that can cover the extent of your plan – expect to drive through the line. Be prepared to share evergreen content over the lifecycle of your project and ‘re-tweet’ materials when it seems reasonable.

To support your promotional activities you must maintain visibility within your chosen channels of communication. People accessing online content have short attention spans and hard won target audiences can be easily lost due to lack of activity in any specific channel you decide to support. Here you need to maintain interest by piggy backing on the work of others. You can ‘echo’ other people’s work in blogs, on websites and through media channels like Twitter and LinkedIn. When reporting the findings of others cross-reference your own project (link to your project website, Twitter account, blog etc.) wherever possible.

Digital networks have an insatiable appetite for copy – it is unlikely you will be able to leave a mark on your own. Any mark you do make will be temporary and you will need to refresh it regularly. In the words of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

“Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time”

The tide is coming.

There is no point complaining about the destination from the back of the bus. Decide who you want to be and engage.
Channels

Communication channels refer to the way information is cascaded to the world at large. A summary of various different communication channels, and their strengths and weaknesses is provided in Appendix 1. Most academic projects require the dissemination of information through traditional channels:

- Scientific journals
- Congress and workshops

Dissemination through academic channels should be defined and pre-planned in your strategic communications plan.

As your broader dissemination activities are directly dependent on material available to echo and your budget, may be more difficult to establish a ‘plan’ for per se. In these cases, it is more common to define an ‘activities’ platform. This usually describes what you expect to do with each ‘vehicle’ as it becomes available. This might involve preparation of press releases, submission of stories to news providers, tweeting and/or distributing the information in a newsletter. It should also describe the key channels you plan to use and how you expect to exploit them.

- Emails, newsletters and blogs (Mailchimp, networks)
- Videos and interviews (YouTube, blogs)
- Social media (Twitter, Facebook, Nuzzel)
- News services (online web services Radio – local TV)
- Websites (ResearchGate, LinkedIn)

Almost everybody uses email for communicating with customers, vendors and fellow-workers. Its speed and efficiency make it an ideal means to convey a message or an instruction in an instant. What’s more, a permanent record of the exchange is created, which can be referred to months or even years later. When done correctly you can even track what people do with the email. Thus, it is a great way of distributing press releases, newsletters and links to other online resources you have created. However, most of us receive hundreds of messages a day. While it is true that the emails you send to team members will most likely be read, there is a good chance that your communication to peers or other recipients will be ignored or simply deleted.

The secret of winning in your attempts to gain share of voice will depend on your ability to enlist supporters to engage with your cause. You need to give people a good reason to read your materials and then share it with others. You will need people to echo your efforts through their own communication channels and provide you with material you can use in your own channels.

Face-to-Face

Face-to-face meetings are powerful. They offer you the greatest opportunity to convince others of the value of your project. It is personal and by reading your interviewee (or simply by asking) you can get feedback immediately. It is often advisable to use face-to-face meetings in conjunction with other channels to reinforce your messages. It’s especially important to seek and accept face-to-face meetings with newer contacts because technology can never match the power of a human connection.

It may be easier as a shy person to communicate on a one-to-one basis but what do you say? Make the most of your opportunity. Rehearse and use ‘elevator pitches’ to get their points across quickly. Have you prepared an elevator speech? A short summary used to quickly and simply describe yourself or your project and its value proposition. If your conversation in those few seconds is sufficiently interesting it will either continue after the elevator ride, or end in an exchange of business cards or a scheduled meeting some time in the future.
Strategic communication planning

In a content-saturated communication space it is essential to ensure that your audience identifies your communications as being worthy of their attention. In terms of healthcare professionals and scientists building a reputation that will be appreciated by your peers requires use of standard channels of communication:

- Manuscripts published in respected journals – primary and secondary
- Congress and workshops – abstracts, posters, reports, slides and presentations
- Grant applications
- Concepts, discussion pieces and white papers

These vehicles often require a substantial investment of resource and time. Care must also be taken to use your data efficiently while avoiding any accusation of ‘salami slicing’ [3]. As such, it is critical to plan in detail your resource utilisation, particularly when your project involves multiple partners. These often call for implementation of publication plans or strategic communications plans (where consideration has been given to timing of publications and efficient resource utilisation to achieve key objectives). The content and format of these plans are discussed in our Insider’s Insight – Branding Science [2].

Effectively you should see the communications plan as a living document that frames all your communication activities, clarifies your priorities, target audiences, resources, channels and vehicles. The plan should incorporate details of activities that follow key milestones (i.e., end of a study).

Secret of success

Service providers who offer to promote you ‘on-line’ might lead you to believe that there is a simple formula for success. Believe it or not, this is not true. Many factors will influence the impact of your promotional activities not least of all being whether or not your ‘messages’ meet the current zeitgeist. Luck (mostly a matter of having the right story at the right time) can also play a role. However, there are a number of factors that will give your activities their best chance they may have beyond winning the share of voice. These are:

- Clarity
- Credibility
- Consistency
- Tone and appeal
- Ensure that you fulfil needs
- Tell a story/transmit a message
- Enlisting supporters
Networks and target audiences

A target audience is a specific group of people you would like to receive information about vehicles and who might benefit from your dissemination activities. Often your dissemination network involves people who are already in your address book and therefore likely to have some interest in your progress and be prepared to share distribute your news across a broader network. The more you know of the people in your network the better you can target your activities to them.

To increase your influence you need to increase the size of your network, reaching out to a diverse pool of people. Simply collecting business cards and attending events may expand your number of contacts, but does not increase the likelihood that those contacts will benefit you in the future. To reap the benefits of networking when you need them, you must know how to make your network work for you, and how you can work for your network. The most universally agreed upon networking tip is to help others first, and they will return the favour. Think beyond your current needs, focus on becoming known and trusted instead; a long-lasting relationship is more beneficial to both parties. While Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and other online networking sites can become time drains, online networking is useful for strengthening connections. By posting Facebook or Twitter links to relevant articles, you can provide value to your virtual friends and show your engagement with pertinent business issues. Writing original articles or posting commentary keeps you on other people’s minds and enables them to see how involved you are in your industry. It is an efficient way to continue a relationship with those you know. But online communication is not enough, especially for newer contacts. The true benefit it provides is that it often leads to in-person contact because people feel more comfortable initiating a meeting with someone they already ‘know’ electronically.

If you are working as part of a consortium, project team or collaboration you should encourage everyone to share their contacts. To make the team feel comfortable about sharing these contacts it can be helpful to draw up an arrangement that defines the scope of any engagement with their contacts. Find ways to continually recruit people to your network. Principles to remember when building your network include:

**Do:**
- Be genuine to gain credibility and keep long-term relations
- Feed the network (via Twitter, Facebook, emails, etc.) to pass on useful information and show you are engaged
- Offer to help using humour and tact

**Don’t:**
- Focus on getting something from a new contact immediately
- Hide behind technology and avoid face-to-face networking
- Forget to read your audience and provide a personal approach

The secret power of Twitter

What good reason has a rational scientist got for being on Twitter? Surely it is a haven for the intellectually challenged and the vapuous? Not so – do not underestimate the power of Twitter. On Twitter you can build your brand. You can search-out like-minded bloggers and in following them be updated with things going on within your field. This often results in these people following your own blog (about 1 in 3 people follow you back). When you start sharing information in tweets your network will start to grow of its own accord – offering you the chance to escape your own filter bubble. This means that you have a ready audience at that key point when you have something important to share.

There are many places on the internet that will advise you on how to get the best out of Twitter. The key point to remember is to stay true to your brand. Do not see it as a social service – follow the right people, only tweet relevant material, stay professional (see Secret of success) and fit your tweeting schedule into your strategic communication plan.

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What is the single most important factor for a successful dissemination plan?
Noise. You need to capture an audience before you can share stories. No single consortium, no matter how large, can maintain the level of copy generation necessary to keep a steady flow of new information. You must become the conduit through which news related to your field can flow. You echo high interest stories from other groups. You can use products like Nuzzel (www.nuzzel.com) to create your own daily newsletters from Twitter feeds. Exploit different channels to distribute the same story. In the end however it comes down to your ability to network.

How do you get the most out of your activities?
The amazing thing about the internet is that you can easily cross-reference (and drive readers) to many different sources of information. These can be created by you, curated by you or simply accessed through you. There are a considerable number of internet users (more than ANY journal) all looking for content that might be valuable to them. Being the conduit through which people can access that information gives you the opportunity to direct them to your own content and cross-reference to even more sources that support your key messages.

How can I build audience engagement?
People are always keen to share their opinion with you. Once you have a network you can engage it by asking it questions. This will provide the opportunity to start conversations with key individuals. Those eager to engage with you are converted into ‘champions’ of your messages. Simple online questionnaires distributed through free online services like Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) will boost engagement.

What do you find most frustrating?
Lack of engagement. When you work with a group of people with same goal it can be disappointing when they fail to appreciate the role they play in programme promotion, dissemination activities and, ultimately, in tooting their own horn. You will also need to be a little thick-skinned – feedback is not always positive.

Tools and metrics
Create a Google Scholar profile and become active on ResearchGate and Linked-in or Academia.edu. You can also use LinkedIn to advertise scientific qualifications and promote publications and awards. A You tube account can be used to distribute a video blog, while your own website can be used as a news hub to publish your stories. You can reference to these resources through Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

One of the most important factors of undertaking promotional activities is to monitor the success of your efforts. There are many ways in which you can establish metrics – some methods are more expensive and more useful than others. Some will provide you with data simply as a result of you interacting with them. However, do not become engrossed in the statistics, they should only be used as a guide that you are having an effect and your efforts are working. You might also compare the success rates of different strategies – but remember, take the data with a pinch of salt, it is most likely that you will be comparing apples with oranges.

Free to use tools include:
- ResearchGate
- MailChimp
- Survey Monkey
- Google analytics stats
- LinkedIn
- Twitter
And finally….  
In a culture that seems to be geared towards extroverts there are still ways that quiet but determined scientists can show their strength. As the saying goes – ‘on the internet you can be anything you want to be’. There are three key points you must remember.

First, the process of dissemination and promotion should be closely managed to ensure message alignment, appropriate allocation of resources and milestone achievement. Second, you should track every piece of copy you create and where/when it was released (this doesn’t include material you have echoed). Third, you should plan to evolve your promotional activities as your project matures. Although your Single Minded Proposition may stay the same you can expect your key messages to change over time. A good strategic communications plan should incorporate plans for its evolution.

References