

The purpose of branding in science

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The Black Hole

Branding is the exercise of summarizing an organization's culture to attract a particular type of employee, collaborator or funder.

BY JONATHAN THON | NOV 17 2020

“The art of branding is firstly to attract the kind of people you want to work with.”

– Jonathan Thon

Like it or not, branding and self-promotion are an integral part of science. Our training might focus primarily on how to *do* science, but that isn't enough; we also need to promote ourselves and our findings in order to persuade others to fund and collaborate on our research, and to highlight the value of our discoveries so we can broaden their reach.

It's always been this way. The financial support of scientific discovery was historically provided by wealthy patrons who typically backed an individual or a handful of scientists who had to market themselves to get attention (The financial cost of doing science). These days, the role of individual patron has been assumed by diverse government, philanthropic, and private sources of grant funding, and it's our peers who we have to impress, via the peer review process.

Brand: A person's perception of a product, service, experience, or organization.

Culture: A set of shared values, goals, attitudes and practices that characterize an organization.

Fit: Alignment. Lack of mismatch.

What do peer reviewers look for when evaluating a funding proposal? Different programs have different criteria, but almost all focus on the applicant's publication record. It therefore follows that scientific publications, by definition, are a form of advertisement, typically paid for by the authoring investigator/institution to promote their work. And why shouldn't this be the case? The broad communication of research is critical to realizing the social value it can create, and scientists rely on the impact of their work, measured by the profile and reach of their publications, to value their own scientific contributions and those of others. Our industry relies on name recognition (author, institution, journal), which has become both a currency and the primary metric for promotion and tenure today.

It's curious, then, that many scientists should be so resistant to the idea of branding, which

is almost a dirty word in some parts of academic research. I suspect this is because many of us associate self-promotion and marketing with a lack of substance, and because we've never been explicitly taught how the two can and do co-exist as independent attributes in science.

Of course, publications represent just one facet of the overall theme of self-promotion and branding. While scientists often discuss branding-related topics such as the accurate representation of scientific advancements beyond academic publishing, and the attention individual discoveries have warranted or received, we have a tendency to ignore the forest for the trees. There is a more immediate and impactful purpose for branding in the sciences that is less talked about and that warrants more consideration, and that is in recruitment and team-building.

Science is performed by people, and the people we choose to recruit, collaborate with, and let fund our work define the science we do together. Entire fields of research are often closely associated with specific prominent individuals in that field, their idiosyncrasies, and values. People bring unique perspectives and approaches to scientific questions and will advance research in different nuanced (and not so nuanced) ways depending on their character. Just like how the same song will sound completely different when interpreted and performed by different artists, each research program is unique to the principal investigator and their team, inclusive of collaborators and funders. Also like a song, some research programs require a unique complement of personalities and skillsets to pull off, and every research program is different. Each decade also sees different research fields grow to take a more prominent position socially or recede from the public eye as different personalities enter and exit a field.

Whether or not a research program is getting the attention it may or may not deserve, the primary focus and the art of branding is to attract the kind of people you want to work with while giving the program the best possible chance of success. In industry the term we use is "fit" and it describes how well an individual matches an organizational culture. When the fit is right, organizations can get more out of their employees, and the employees can be more productive because they enjoy the environment and work. Branding is the exercise of summarizing an organization's culture (the composite of personalities, communication style, expectations, surroundings, and feel that make up a working environment) to attract a particular type of employee, collaborator, or funder. It begins with one person, whose personality defines the entirety of the culture at first, and evolves as each subsequent person is brought in. How much a new recruit will contribute to the team's brand will depend on how much of their personality is injected into the cultural mix, but there is no person, no matter how limited their role, whose personality won't move the culture.

My next post will focus on the benefits of aligning your brand and culture and the ramifications of mismatch.

ABOUT JONATHAN THON

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