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How to brag without sounding arrogant, according to new research

It turns out there is a right way and a wrong way to brag about your professional accomplishments.

[Photo: Image Source/Getty Images]

BY JARED LINDZON 5 MINUTE READ

For some, showing off comes naturally. For most, however, there's a real discomfort associated with bragging about your professional accomplishments, but that reluctance can prevent us from receiving due credit.

Fear not, shy braggers, because new research proves there is at least one effective way to toot your own horn without those negative feelings. According to a recent study conducted by researchers at Vanderbilt University, the best way to take credit for your accomplishments is to do so while hyping up those around you.

According to the study, *Dual-Promotion: Bragging Better by Promoting Peers*, coupling your own accomplishments with those of others takes out that bitterness in bragging that can leave a bad taste.

"There's what's called the self-promotion dilemma, this idea that when you self-promote you do look more competent . . . but it hurts [perceptions of] warmth," said Vanderbilt University associate professor of marketing and the study's lead author, Eric VanEpps. "Typically, they're seen as opposing forces; if I increase competence I do it at the cost of warmth, but if I say really nice things about other people, or self-deprecate, I'll look warm, but at the cost of competence."

Across a series of studies examining a range of hypothetical scenarios the researchers found that coupling self-promotion with praise for others increased perceptions of both warmth and competence. In fact, when study participants were given the choice between two candidates competing in a mock primary election against a fellow party member, the one whose policy statements included praise for their opponent received 81% of likely votes.

"As we go through our careers, we're often worried about claiming credit for what we've done," VanEpps says. "This is a strategy that allows you to claim credit, so you don't get passed over for a promotion because you didn't let people know what you did—but you also don't have to be a lone wolf who people hate because you take all the credit for yourself."

With that in mind VanEpps expressed pride in his paper being published in the prestigious *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and noted that he is excited to see what his capable and thoughtful co-authors—Einav Hart and Maurice Schweitzer—accomplish next.

BIAS IN BRAGGING

When it comes to self-promotion, studies show that the medium is the message, as we tend to expect or even encourage bragging from some, while criticizing others for the same behaviors. Specifically, research shows that men engage in "substantially more self-promotion" than women. In fact, a 2019 Harvard study found that men rate their own performance 33% higher than equally performing women.

“Historically positive attributes for women were associated with passive behaviors, like being poised, being shy, being timid,” says executive consultant Meredith Fineman, adding that comfort with self-promotion can also vary based on culture, class, sexual orientation, age, and more.

“’The qualified quiet,’ the people who have done the work and don’t know how to talk about it, that exists at every level, regardless of gender, seniority, race or age,” she says. “A lot of this is tied to privilege, and you aren’t necessarily taught that your ideas and the things you have to say are important.”

Fineman, who authored the book *Brag Better,* likens the fear of bragging to imposter syndrome, suggesting that it’s normal to feel undeserving of credit, even when it’s rightfully earned. That is why she believes sharing the spotlight can be an effective solution, especially for women, and the research agrees.

In their study, VanEpps and his team tried every binary gendered combination of the dual-promotion strategy and found no change in its effects.

“It works equally well for men and women to dual promote and equally well whether the other person you promote is male or female,” he said. “That’s important because there’s a lot of work showing that women in particular have been less likely to self-promote.”

A NECESSARY EVIL

We all know the braggy type: the verbose, can’t get enough of themselves, always steering the conversation back to themselves—the kind of person that we eventually tune out entirely. According to Fineman, it is our fear of becoming that show-off that prevents us from engaging in what is an otherwise necessary practice, especially in professional settings.

“We all know someone who we think is annoying or obnoxious or a blowhard, but finding a way to do this that is true to you is important,” she says. “The key difference is the self-awareness; that person is not self-aware, and if you’re questioning these things, you already [demonstrate] self-awareness.”

Experts agree that there is a right way and a wrong way to brag about your professional accomplishments, but we often only take notice when it’s done the wrong way.

“When people just recite their résumé and dump information on you, and just talk incessantly without asking anything about you, those are bad bragging behaviors,” says communication and leadership coach Peggy Klaus. “There are a lot of bad bragging behaviors, but you can circumvent those by bragging appropriately, keeping it short, meaningful to the audience, and making it an interaction.”

SELF-PROMOTING WHILE REMOTING

Klaus, who published the book *Brag! The Art of Tooting Your Own Horn Without Blowing It* in 2003, says her advice for effective self-promotion hasn't changed much over the last 20 years, though it has become even more important in the age of remote and hybrid work. That is because we now have fewer opportunities to show and tell our accomplishments to others.

"Since a lot of us aren't in the office and we don't have those opportunities for a fly-by, or a water cooler or cafeteria chat, we have to make sure we do it virtually," she says. "I've been encouraging my clients, who are business leaders, to include this in every meeting that they have; to do a round robin so that people can talk about an obstacle they overcame or a success they've had."

Klaus adds that she has been advising others to share the spotlight as an effective means of bragging for decades, and while she's happy to see more research on the subject, complimenting others has always been a recommended practice. To facilitate better shared bragging, she recommends taking a moment to learn more about the contributions that others would like to highlight, and being more explicit about how you would like to be acknowledged.

"I say in the book that you've got to prepare people to brag for you," Klaus says. "You can't just rely on others to know what you're doing and accomplishing."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jared Lindzon is a freelance journalist and public speaker born, raised and based in Toronto, Canada. Lindzon's writing focuses on the future of work and talent as it relates to technological innovation, as well as entrepreneurship, technology, politics, sports and music.