

Knowing Your Personal Brand: What Academics Can Learn From Marketing 101

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Abstract

Academic departments are increasingly borrowing from the business world as they encourage faculty members to consider their personal mission, vision, and values statements in crafting their plans for engagement and advancement. Business organizations have long known that although doing the work necessary to refine these internal guideposts is important, failing to understand what consumers actually perceive about their product is detrimental. In the business world, perception is reality, and understanding the external shorthand

of what consumers perceive—that is, the brand—is essential. Academic clinicians have a brand whether they take ownership of it or not. A faculty member's brand is both what their work (academic products) and how they do their work say about them to those who encounter it. In this Perspective, the authors explore the brand framework informed by marketing literature, and they outline a four-step process for faculty members to identify their own personal brands. The authors share how knowing one's academic brand can (1)

help faculty members approach projects and other responsibilities through the lens of building or detracting from that brand, (2) provide a framework for determining how faculty members might best work within their institutions, and (3) help faculty members better understand and advocate their own engagement and advancement. The authors also share a paradigm for finding one's brand sweet spot at the intersection of passion, skill, and institutional need, and they propose how working outside of this sweet spot is a setup for failure.

Understanding mission, vision, and values has long been an essential step in organizational development. Businesses, including health care organizations, expend great effort meticulously wordsmithing these statements to help provide a compass with which they can establish a strategy for and measure the effectiveness of their work.^{1,2} Increasingly, scholars have called for academic medical providers to engage in reflection exercises to craft their own personal mission statements.^{3–5} Personal mission statements are grounded in the authors' assessment and understanding of their values, and they allow for and even encourage periodic self-assessment.⁴ Business leaders know that although mission and values are important, those internal metrics are not enough to navigate a crowded marketplace; *brand* is the key.

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What Is a Brand and Why Knowing It Matters

While business organizations understand the importance of “knowing thyself” through establishing mission, vision, and values, they also realize that this knowledge provides little benefit if they do not understand consumers' perception of the unique features of their product.^{6–8} This “end-user perception” of the product and its position in the landscape of competitors is the product's brand. Whereas mission, vision, and value statements are crafted by the organization, the organization's brand is ultimately defined by consumers (Chart 1). Consumers' perceptions of a product or an organization reflect their emotional connection with both the product and, ultimately, the organization itself.^{6,9} Accordingly, organizations know that intentionally guiding brand formation is the most essential aspect of developing—and maintaining—a successful product.^{6–8,10,11}

The concept of “branding” originated from the branding of livestock. Branding is a means of associating a credible, consistent image with what to expect from the product in the minds of consumers.¹² In other words, a good brand helps consumers navigate a crowded marketplace by providing a quick association for what that product

will provide, differentiating it from its competition. Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, famously said, “Your brand is what people say about you when you're not in the room.”¹⁰ Successful companies know their brand and relentlessly stick to it. Disney's brand of *magic*, Apple's *creativity*, and Volvo's *safety* are all examples of single-word associations that the companies seek to maintain.¹¹

Everyone in academics, including in the world of academic medicine, has a brand, whether they intentionally shape it or not. Whereas faculty members' mission or vision statements do not exist unless they have taken the time to write them, their brand does exist, informed by the views of “consumers” (i.e., mentors, other faculty members, promotions committees). Faculty members' brands represent both what their work (their academic products) and how they do that work say about them to those who encounter them and their work. Accordingly, being intentional about crafting and maintaining one's brand can be a powerful part of a successful academic career.

In this Perspective, we outline a process through which faculty members identify their own personal brands and then apply this knowledge to academic engagement and advancement. We originally

Chart 1

The Distinct Roles of Mission, Vision, and Values vs Brand Identity

Mission	Vision	Values	Brand
Who we think we are	Who we want to become	What informs who we are	Who others perceive us to be
	<i>Determined internally</i>		<i>Determined externally</i>

developed the four steps in conjunction with a marketing professional who specializes in corporate branding (S.P.). Applying literature from the world of business, we have refined this process at several national workshops^{13–15} and at our own institutions. We believe that knowing one's academic brand can (1) help faculty members approach projects and other responsibilities through the lens of building or detracting from that brand, (2) provide a framework for determining how faculty members might best work within their institutions, and (3) help faculty members better understand and advocate their own engagement and advancement.

Figuring Out One's Brand

For many in academic medicine, tracking professional accomplishments is a dry exercise of updating a curriculum vitae (CV) on a periodic basis. These documents often serve as the main evidence of productivity and contributions to the field; however, we posit that simply maintaining a list of committee work, publications, and awards is not enough to truly help faculty identify their own strengths and may limit their ability to highlight accomplishments.

A growing body of literature encourages academics to consider their own mission, vision, and values as part of their personal development,^{3–5} and we agree that this internal work is important. In fact, we endorse the recommendation that faculty spend time crafting personal mission, vision, and values statements, and we encourage the use of the INSPIRE framework which has been refined for this purpose.⁴ We argue, however, that just as marketers realize that consumer perception is reality, academics are shortsighted if they stop after creating these statements and do not look externally at what they project as their personal brand. For faculty to truly understand their best fit in academic

medicine requires not only self-reflection and assessment of personal goals but also insight into how external parties view current achievements and desired future activities.⁹ Faculty members should view their professional development through the lens of creating a brand. Just as consumer products go through many rounds of testing and focus groups to find a market niche, faculty members can benefit from trials of packaging their brand and "selling it" to peers and mentors to see whether their current brand matches their desired brand.

As a part of our workshop on the importance of branding for professional development, we have developed an exercise, informed by the conceptual framework of Schön's reflection on practice,¹⁶ that aims to help faculty members self-identify their current and desired brand. While we developed these materials and exercises for delivery in a workshop format, they could be easily incorporated into mentoring sessions or an annual faculty review process. Here, we describe in detail the three steps of the process that we use in the workshop and provide ideas on how to adapt the exercises outside a workshop setting. We have provided a partially completed version of the handout that accompanies this exercise (Appendix 1) to serve as an example. We also briefly describe Step 4, which occurs after the workshop. Finally, we end this section with a summary of the feedback we have received thus far.

Steps 1 and 2 could be completed by a faculty member before a mentoring session or faculty review, or while crafting personal statements for a promotion packet.

Step 1: Self-Reflection

Participants create a list of the five accomplishments of which they are most proud. We encourage faculty to define this list quite broadly, as academic products or positions that may include

publications, key mentoring activities, teaching, clinical care, or advocacy efforts. We then ask faculty members to consider why they are most proud of the items in the list and to describe how each accomplishment represents their academic passions.

Step 2: Self-Brand

After creating their list of accomplishments, faculty members look for common themes to determine their current brand (i.e., what the work they are most proud of says about them). We then ask them to identify a phrase that encapsulates the common thread reflected in their outward-facing accomplishments. This personal brand should be concise in keeping with the concept that brands serve as a shortcut to help consumers understand the essence of a product quickly. For example, one of the authors who intentionally designs presentations and focuses on strategies to make education more engaging and fun suggested "Fun Scholar by Design." Another author, who is proud of her work with mentees and her willingness to take on innovative initiatives, branded herself "Optimistic Implementer and Coach." In short, each faculty member's personal brand should answer the question "What does my work say about me?" That is, the brand should complete the sentence "My work shows others I am a _____." We encourage participants not to worry about crafting the perfect or most clever phrase because the phrase is not intended to be disseminated. Rather, participants use the reflection to concisely capture what it is about their work that fills them with pride because that essence forms their brand.

Step 3: Focus Group

Marketers know that companies are not terribly effective at understanding their own brand identities; company executives may think their product represents prestige and success, whereas consumers may hold an opposite view.^{6,10} Accordingly, intentionally seeking feedback regarding end users' perceptions is an essential aspect to understanding one's brand.^{6,7,9} As such, for Step 3, we have faculty engage in a mini focus group, wherein other faculty members (peers, mentors) review both the list of accomplishments and the reasons the faculty member is proud of the accomplishments. These peers and

mentors come to their own conclusions about the personal brand that the list and reasons suggest. In our workshops, we most often invite two or three faculty members—all previously unknown to one another—to review each other's lists, discuss the content, and then craft what they would say captures the others' brand. We encourage expanding the groups if possible because one theme from the feedback we have received suggests that the more input the participants get from others, the more helpful the experience is. For faculty who are working through this process outside of a workshop setting, an initial focus group may consist of a faculty mentor and close colleagues.

Comparing one's self-identified brand with an externally identified brand is an important reality check. This comparison allows faculty members to determine whether the brand they wish to portray matches what others perceive as their brand. For example, if a faculty member believes that her brand is a "Creative Curriculum Designer," but external reviewers suggest that she might be an "Informatics Expert," the faculty member should explore what led the external reviewers to that perception of her brand. Additionally, we recommend that faculty members extend the insights gained from the initial focus group by later reviewing their brand through an in-depth interview with other faculty at their home institutions to ensure that their desired brand aligns with the impressions of colleagues most familiar with their work. We then encourage faculty to seek feedback from outside their department (i.e., at national meetings) and outside their specialty area. For example, a pediatric faculty member may benefit from an internal medicine or surgical colleague's review of their brand. Asking faculty who are both more junior and more senior to review this brand can also be helpful.

Faculty members can use either the workshop focus group or the postworkshop in-depth interview of others to explore their brand with not only current "customers" (their current mentor and department colleagues) but also potential future "customers" (colleagues at a national level or other departments). Focus groups and in-depth interviews are well recognized within the business world as key approaches that companies leverage to gain additional insights into how their brand is externally

perceived.¹⁷ Similarly, faculty members could ask colleagues whom they do not know to review their CV/promotion packet and then share their impression of the brand that the materials project. Next, faculty could explore whether that impression (i.e., the brand) matches their desired brand. If not, perhaps they need to present their work in a way that better illuminates their brand, or they need to add activities to their work that align with their brand.

Step 4: Comparison of Desired Brand to CV

We recommend that after faculty members complete Steps 1–3 to refine their desired brand, they circle back to their CV and promotions dossier to see whether their desired brand aligns with their current activities. In the same way that a company will periodically revisit its brand's positioning to assess market share, competition, and future growth, so too a faculty member should periodically reassess his or her brand.

Feedback thus far

Since 2017, several hundred faculty members have participated in our self-reflection/self-branding workshop. We obtained Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Minnesota to review feedback. Nearly all of the 145 participants who have provided feedback through an anonymous postworkshop questionnaire have indicated that the exercise is valuable, rating their likelihood of using what they learned in the future a 4.9 on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all likely, 5 = definitely). Many participants

explicitly indicated that gathering outside perspectives on their brand was helpful. One attendee wrote that the "self-reflection activity was eye-opening," and another wrote that "when thinking of my own brand, I noticed [a] discrepancy between what I have accomplished and how I am currently seen by others and who I want to be." Workshop attendees reported that recognizing this mismatch can be helpful in making decisions about which future projects and responsibilities they would undertake. To illustrate, one participant commented that it was "useful thinking about how something would or would not contribute to what I want my brand to be."

So You Know Your Brand, Now What? Living in the Brand Sweet Spot

After defining their desired brand, faculty members should next assess how their personal brand fits into their workplace. We propose the concept of a "brand sweet spot," which reflects the intersection of three key components: (1) one's passions, (2) one's strengths, and (3) the needs of one's institution (Figure 1). The ideal synergy lies at the heart of the Venn diagram, where a faculty member's passions and skills overlap with their institution's priorities. This paradigm was inspired by the work that Greg McKeown details in *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, in which he argues for seeking an overlap of talent, passion, and market.¹⁸ Additionally, Lieff has elegantly described an approach to academic career planning that emphasizes finding meaningful work within the context

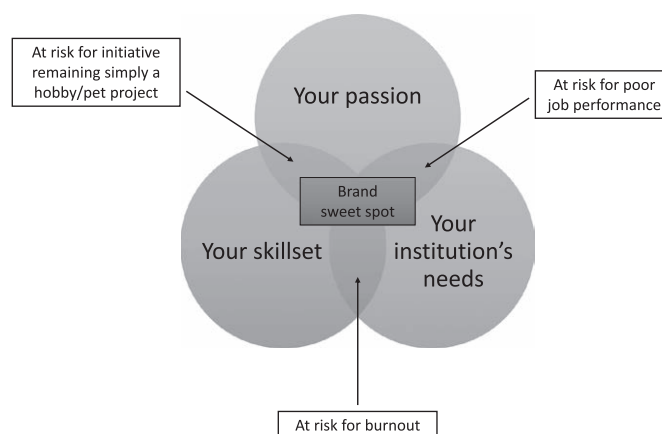


Figure 1 Venn diagram representing how academic faculty members can identify whether projects or roles land in their personal brand sweet spot at the intersection of their passions, their skills, and their institution's needs. Note the inherent risks when initiatives address only two of the three domains (i.e., hobby, poor performance, burnout).

of a department or practice.¹⁹ We have developed our approach, building on these concepts,^{18,19} by explicitly naming the potential consequences that may occur when just two of the components overlap.¹⁹ For example, if a faculty member is skilled in a specific area, and his institution needs faculty with that skill, but he is not passionate about it, he may have high job security but low job satisfaction and be at risk for burnout.²⁰ Conversely, if faculty members engage in work that they are passionate about that also meets an institutional need, but they are not good at it, they may be at risk of poor job performance, especially if they do not seek support in gaining new skills. Finally, if a faculty member has passion and skill for an area of work, but there is no place for it at the institution, that work will remain a hobby or extracurricular activity (at least until the faculty member makes the case that the institution needs to address this area).¹⁹ Aiming for career activities that lie within one's brand sweet spot may be protective against burnout, as evidenced by the work of Shanafelt and colleagues,²¹ which demonstrates that faculty who spend at least 20% of their time on an activity that is meaningful experience less burnout.

How Knowing One's Brand Can Help in Academics

Having a clear sense of personal brand, coupled with an awareness of the ideal market for one's brand, positions faculty members to promote their own professional development and career advancement. Using desired personal brand as a guiding principle can allow faculty to be more selective in taking on new projects. Just as companies are intentional about not pursuing projects that do not reflect their brand, a faculty member who hopes to build a career as an innovator in medical education might consider whether committee work in another area is "off-brand." By plotting activities on the brand sweet spot diagram, faculty can determine what they can feasibly do that lies at the heart of the Venn diagram and what may be handed off. For example, if faculty members find that their current brand is defined by work that falls into the overlap between passion and skill, but see that the institution does not have an expressed need, they can consider what to change. Can they make a case to stakeholders for the work, conveying the value it adds to

the institution? Are they, in fact, ahead of the institution, on the cutting edge of a development that has not been realized yet as a true need? Conversely, if they cannot change the institutional need, awareness of their brand may motivate them to (re)consider institutional fit. Certainly, faculty members still need to maintain an open mind about their personal brand, and adapting or rebranding may be necessary at many points in a faculty member's career.

For many faculty members, cultivating, maintaining, and being aware of their own brand may feel like self-promotion and be quite uncomfortable. Furthermore, viewing professional development and advancement through the lens of marketing and branding may require an adjustment in approach for more senior faculty members who are providing guidance for junior faculty. Junior faculty may be more comfortable with the paradigm of personal branding than those who believe that the work must speak for itself and that any attempt to package it differently is merely self-promotion that undermines the work itself. Notably, however, faculty members' brand exists whether they are aware of it or not. Distilling and defining that brand may empower faculty to serve as their own agents in advocating opportunities and advancement for themselves.¹⁹ Additionally, just as knowing their brand helps companies create loyal customers, having a clear brand awareness and being intentional in maintaining it can help colleagues and collaborators better understand a faculty member's skills and capabilities, which, in turn, allows those colleagues to advocate for the faculty member's advancement and inclusion in new opportunities.

By understanding and accepting that everyone has a brand, whether they take ownership of it or not, and recognizing how this end-user perception of work relates to their product, academic faculty can be intentional about auditing and reshaping their brands as an ongoing part of their professional development.

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Appendix 1

Example of Brand Reflection Worksheet With Steps 1 (Self-Reflection), 2 (Self-Brand), and 3 (Focus Group) Completed by Author (S.T.T.L.)^a

STEP 1: SELF-REFLECTION	
List up to 5 things you have DONE professionally that you are most proud of. (this highlights <u>academic products/ positions</u>)	Explain why you are PROUD of each accomplishment. (this highlights <u>personal passions</u>)
1. Chair, APPD LEAD (Association of Pediatric Program Directors Leadership in Educational Academic Development) Council	Developing our new leaders in Graduate Medical Education
2. Associate Editor for Medical Education, Academic Pediatrics	Elevating the bar for medical education scholarship in pediatrics
3. Li ST , et al. Competent for Unsupervised Practice: Use of Pediatric Residency Training Milestones to Assess Readiness. <i>Academic Medicine</i> . 2017; 92(3):385–393.	Collaborative medical education scholarship
4. Li ST , et al. Using Your Personal Mission Statement to INSPIRE and Achieve Success. <i>Academic Pediatrics</i> . 2017; 17(2):107–109.	Mentoring others
5. Lifelong learning and Milestones papers	Improving medical education
← FOLD OVER HERE SO PARTNER DOES NOT SEE YOUR BRAND ATTEMPT →	
STEP 2: SELF-BRAND	
Based on your accomplishments and personal passions, please use a 2–4 word phrase to complete this sentence: (do not show to other members of your focus group) “My work shows others I am a <u>Innovative Collaborative Scholar</u>”	
← FOLD OVER HERE SO PARTNER DOES NOT SEE YOUR BRAND ATTEMPT →	
STEP 3: FOCUS GROUP	
Based on your colleague’s accomplishments and personal passions, please use a 2–4 word phrase to complete this sentence: (discuss with your colleague) “His/her work shows others he/she is a <u>Collaborative Scholarship Catalyst</u>”	
STEP 4: COMPARISON OF DESIRED BRAND TO CV (to be done later as an individual)	
Critically review your CV using the checklist on the right	Does your CV item align with your self-brand? (if yes, keep; if no, choose from options below) ☐ Keep doing activity due to alignment with institutional mission/needs ☐ Keep doing activity due to personal career satisfaction ☐ Stop doing activity due to misalignment with self-brand ☐ Stop doing activity due to personal career dissatisfaction
After reviewing your CV, what would you do differently in order to re-brand yourself or strengthen your brand?	Possible options include: ✓ Pursue continuing medical education in... ✓ Collaborate with regional or national groups in... ✓ Begin scholarly work in... ✓ Transition away from the following projects... ✓ Other...

^aA blank template is available for download at <https://tinyurl.com/personalbrandtemplate>. This partially completed template has not been edited by *Academic Medicine*.