

The Braggart's Dilemma: How to Promote Yourself Without Being a Jerk

Author : Christian Jarrett

Date : August 2, 2016



Humblebragging, the right way.

It may not come easy, especially if you are humble or quiet by nature, but there are times in your career when you're going to have to step out of the shadow of politeness to shout about your abilities and achievements.

It might be a group interview or a team meeting, and if you don't speak up, somebody else will get the credit you deserve—and possibly the promotion or the sale too.

The dilemma is simple: people who are confident and make their achievements well known (think of Kanye West) are often seen as more competent (makes sense: after all, they've just publicized their successes). Yet in most cultures there is also a cultural norm for modesty, which means that such braggarts are often seen as rude and unlikeable; in fact a [study published this year](#) suggests many of us underestimate just how annoying our boasts can be.

Making sure your achievements are fairly recognized, without people thinking you're a jerk, is all about walking this narrow line. Thankfully, psychology researchers have studied the braggart's dilemma and their results provide us with several practical clues for how to promote ourselves effectively:

Don't promote yourself unprompted.

There's a huge difference between making a self-aggrandizing claim right out of the blue and giving an honest answer when your boss asks you about your performance. In fact, just making sure your boast is relevant to the conversation could make a difference in how you come across.

There's a huge difference between making a self-aggrandizing claim right out of the blue and giving an honest answer.

In 2010, psychologist Nurit Tal-Or [found](#) that participants disliked a fictional character “Avi” who bragged about his exam results if he, and not his conversation partner, brought up the topic of exams. But if the friend brought up the topic, then Avi could boast all he wanted (even if he wasn’t asked directly about his grades)—the participants still thought he was a nice guy. This result provides a useful reminder, especially to quiet types, that it is sometimes acceptable to brag—especially if you’re in an interview or other assessment situation, the fact is people will often expect you to stand up for your own achievements.

Compare yourself to your own past.

One reason boasting can sometimes make such a bad impression is because it’s interpreted as one-upmanship. It feels to other people like you’re putting them, or somebody else, down. Psychologists demonstrated this point in a [series of experiments published in 2012](#) when they asked participants to respond to various boastful statements supposedly made by people in a group discussion about being a student or friendship. So-called “self-superiority” claims such as “I am better than others” (for example, a better friend or a better student) attracted the most negative ratings because they led to the impression that the character was putting others down.

By contrast, “self-improvement” claims, such as “I am better than I used to be” and non-comparative claims, such as “I am a good friend” attracted favorable ratings. The lesson here is clear: if your boast involves claiming your superiority over others, then you’re at grave risk of entering jerk territory. Try to focus on selling your own achievements without taking cheap shots at your colleagues or rivals.

Use a wingman.

Because we live in a culture where it’s (most of the time) frowned on to be excessively boastful, one of the most obvious but effective ways to sell yourself effectively is to have someone *else* advertise your strengths and glories.

Consider an elegant study [published by Dutch psychologists in 2009](#) in which they asked participants to respond to a favorable description of a person in a dating ad. Crucially, the description (including boasts about sociability and competence) was presented either as having been written by the character him or herself, or by a friend or colleague.

The key finding was that participants who thought the description was self-penned subsequently rated the character as less sociable and competent than participants who thought the description was penned by a friend or colleague. The result shows how we tend not to trust positive claims that people make about themselves; yet [we trust the exact same claims](#) far more when they’re made by someone else, even someone likely to be biased, such as a friend or hired agent.

We tend not to trust positive claims that people make about themselves.

Any boasts you want to make about your capabilities or achievements are likely to hold more sway if you can find a trusted “wingman” to make the claims on your behalf. This is where the alliances that you form in your workplace or in your industry more widely can be so important: Having someone else be prepared to sing your praises can be a powerful tool in self-promotion.

Know your audience.

Earlier this year, the organizational psychologists Alison Fragale and Adam Grant [decided to look at this topic](#) a little differently. They acknowledged the mix of findings in the literature that I hinted at earlier— how confident, boastful people can sometimes be perceived as more effective and competent than average, yet how bragging can also attract dislike and disdain. Rather than focusing on the style or personality of the boaster, they asked what is it about the audience that influences whether boasting is an effective strategy or not? In particular, they wondered, what difference does it make if the audience is distracted or focused on the people doing the bragging?

The results, based on participants’ judgments of job candidates after reading their application letters and referral letters, showed that candidates could get away with making self-promotional boasts when the participants were distracted (by a secondary task or by not having much time), but not when the participants were solely focused on the letters. When the participants (who were role-playing as job recruiters) were distracted, they took in the relevant information a boastful candidate made about his own competence, but they forgot or didn’t notice the fact that he had made the aggrandizing claim about himself (when participants were not distracted, they tended to infer that these boastful applicants were less well-mannered and respectful).

Candidates could get away with making self-promotional boasts when the participants were distracted.

It’s worth considering how this result could apply to real life—imagine you’re in a group interview or team meeting, in which the assessor’s or manager’s attention is under pressure and divided. Look around you and feel the temperature of the room—is this the kind of situation where you’ll lose status for blowing your own trumpet? If you brag about your sales in this noisy, competitive context, it’s likely your manager won’t even remember how they came upon the relevant information that you hit your sales targets last month. You’ll benefit from having sold your success, and the fact you violated the modesty-rule won’t even have been noticed.

Beware of excessive modesty.

If you're still struggling with the idea of shouting your achievements from the roof-tops, here's one last research finding to bear in mind: excess modesty can also make a bad impression. For example, in [a study published in the mid-90s](#), people who made self-enhancing statements ("I'm great fun to be with. Often, I'm the life of the party.") were actually rated as more likeable than people who made self-deprecating claims (e.g. "I'm not very much fun to be around. I'm never the life of the party"). If you talk yourself down too much, don't be surprised if people are put off. Unsurprisingly, the most positive ratings were gained by people who made balanced statements by admitting their strengths and flaws.

People who made self-enhancing statements were actually rated as more likeable.

A strategy to definitely avoid is the so-called "humblebrag"—this is when you present a brag in the form of a complaint ("Since my 99U article went viral, the amount of reader emails I get has gone through the roof, it's so time-consuming"). [Research published this year](#) by Harvard researchers found that the humblebrag fails on all counts: the barely concealed boast fails to hit the mark, and yet the message still comes across as boastful, with the result that the humblebragger is seen as both obnoxious and insincere.

—

How about you?

How do you promote yourself in a tactful way?

This article first appeared in www.99u.com