

Brand Who? Brand You!



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During the early days of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners (incorporated in 1985), I spotted a full-page ad by the Campaign Consultants of America addressed to professional fundraisers. What caught my eye was a photograph of a mother with the tagline, “There’s only one person who understands you better than we do, and she still doesn’t understand what you do for a living.” I pulled the page from the magazine and made a note to consider using it to promote the NP profession. What we needed at the time, despite being an established profession, was to publicly market our role as experts in health promotion and disease prevention. What we needed was *brand recognition*.

Historically, branding has been a task undertaken by a company’s marketing department or an advertising agency to identify elements that differentiate their product from the competition’s. Designing a logo, creating a jingle (Oscar-Mayer, anyone?), or recording a sound bite are the means to emphasize the difference. It paints the mental picture people have of a company, a product, or a provider. These cues remind the consumer about the product. So, how does this apply to the NP (and PA) profession?

The importance of establishing a “brand”—of distinguishing ourselves as competent clinicians with a specific skillset to offer the primary care community—cannot be overstated. Personal branding is a key component of fostering patient loyalty, building your reputation, and increasing referrals to your practice. Understanding the needs and desires of patients, their families, and the community is crucial. Our personal brand emphasizes our assets and expertise. While it can be difficult to look at yourself objectively (especially your assets), it is necessary in today’s competitive world of health care.

NPs constitute the fastest-growing segment of the primary care workforce in the US. More than 50 years of transforming health care as we know it has made us indis-

pensable as health care providers. The literature has long supported the position that NPs provide care that is effective, patient-centered, and evidenced-based. Who we are, what we do, and how well we do it has been documented in myriad reports, surveys, and publications. Yet in many ways, we continue to struggle with an in-between identity. Despite our increasing responsibility in the clinical realm, some are *still* confused as to who we are.

We are known as nurses first, yet much of the health care we now provide was traditionally in the “physician-only” domain. And because of that history, our ability to function to the fullest extent of our education has been hobbled. These practice restrictions are counterproductive at a time when our nation is facing serious public health challenges.

Over the years, barriers to practice have slowly been whittled away, but full appreciation and recognition of our professional excellence and our contribution to improve the nation’s health is lacking. The fact that much of the research on health status and health ranking fails to include NPs and PAs is testimony that we remain somewhat invisible. And *that*, my friends, is exactly why it is time to revisit that aforementioned advertisement—not because our mothers don’t know what we do, but because, to some degree, we have eased off the belief that there are still obstacles to full access to NPs as primary care providers. And that is the origin of the need to establish your own brand.

Creating and maintaining your personal brand necessitates that you be multi-functional. You must be a role model, a mentor, and a voice that is respected and reliable. Your brand should advertise what you are known for and what motivates people to seek you, specifically, for their health care needs. Be relentlessly focused on what you do that adds value. As NPs, we have a unique blend of nursing and medicine that allows us to provide the patient-centered care that

is central to meeting the existing and future primary care needs of our nation. From our roots in nursing, we offer patients high-quality care and a provider to partner with them in developing their plan of care.

A foundational component of building your brand is positioning yourself as a credible expert and leader. We each have a unique collection of experiences in preventive and primary care. Share that experience by getting involved in your community: participate in health fairs, interact with local news media, or volunteer to serve on your local health board. Emphasize the quality, flexibility, and continuity of care that you can provide. Share any survey findings that demonstrate your ability to anticipate, meet, and even exceed patients' needs. Demonstrate your ability to deliver quality,

accessible health care in a diverse society with increasingly complex medical needs.

As the nation continues to face a shortage of primary care providers and services—a gap that NPs and PAs are equipped to fill—it's time for us to promote ourselves and advertise all that we can do. This isn't just for our own sakes, but for our patients' as well. Give some serious thought (and even more serious effort) to imagining and developing yourself as a brand. Define your brand's attributes and the qualities or characteristics that make *you* distinctive from your competitors (or even your colleagues). You are the CEO of brand YOU!

If you have examples of how you promote your personal brand, please share them with me at NPeditor@mdedge.com. **CR**