

Academic personal branding: your 'research persona'

An EMBL Fellows' Career Service Handout



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Academic 'research persona' worksheet

Your 'research persona' is a personal brand that provides a clear impression of how you want to be seen as a scientist. **A well-defined 'research persona' can make you and your application stand out and can help people envisage you as a future colleague, particularly at the group leader level.**

We highly recommend reading this [blog-post from Jordan Ward](#), a PI at UC Santa Cruz, that clearly defines this concept, and explains how he developed a brand while planning for faculty applications:

Your research persona can include:

- A clear statement of your research interests that is narrow enough to differentiate you from others, but broad enough that it is understandable and interesting to those outside your subfield.
- Things that you find important as a scientist. For those actively applying for PI roles or who are about to establish a group, you might - for example - want to reflect on how you will lead your group or contribute to your institution/field.

Ideally, your persona will be:

- **Focussed**; people will only remember a few things about you – by focussing on a few key aspects and consistently (but subtly!) communicating / reflecting these in the things you do, people are more likely to remember these specific points and form a clear (if incomplete) picture of you as a scientist.
- **Specific** to you: ideally, a scientist should be able to recall your brand e.g. 'I spoke with a postdoc at [your institute] who works on ... and is interested in ...' and someone else who has interacted with you will know immediately that they are referring to you. If your brand could apply to every postdoc at your institute, this will be harder to achieve.
- **Communicated consistently** across multiple channels – the key points of your persona should be reflected in your job application materials, your online presence, any talks you give, and your interactions with people.
- **Genuine and authentic** – if the persona you communicate does not match up with your actual personality and the things you have done, it will not be effective.

To help you develop and communicate your research persona, we include some exercises below that draw on a published method¹, developed for academic clinicians.

¹ Knowing Your Personal Brand: What Academics Can Learn From Marketing 101

Borman-Shoap, Emily MD; Li, Su-Ting T. MD, MPH; St Clair, Nicole E. MD; Rosenbluth, Glenn MD; Pitt, Susan; Pitt, Michael B. MD
Academic Medicine [94\(9\):p 1293-1298, September 2019](#). | DOI: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000002737

Step 1. Self-reflection

First consider what you **could** include in your current brand.

1a. What experiences have been important to your career to date (degrees, mentors, exchanges or other experiences).

1b. What other activities are you involved in outside lab? Other particular scientific or societal issues that you are engaged in? How do you spend your free time?

1c. What (broad / specific) research areas have you worked on to-date? What are your main areas of technical expertise and scientific knowledge?

1d. What FIVE accomplishments to-date are you most proud of, and why?

Accomplishment	Reason

Step 2. Looking forward

The main focus of your brand will be communicating yourself as a future colleague.

2a. What are the specific biological questions you would like to answer as a PI? Can you summarise this in one or two bullet points?

2b. Thinking about your future lab, what kind of culture would you want to foster in your research group? How do you envisage yourself as a PI – what topics or themes will be important to you?

Step 3. Refining your brand

A memorable brand is focused and authentic. It should be consistent with the impression people receive when they meet you (online or in-person), or when they read your CV.

Go back through your answers to step 1-2, and consider:

- are there any common themes running through your past and future work (e.g. types of research questions, or approaches to answer those questions)?
- what has been the driving force motivating your research?
- what would you like others to remember about who you are as a scientist?
- what is absolutely essential to understand who you are as a scientist?
- how can you make your focus / niche within your field clear, while keeping the description short and understandable to people outside your field?
- what aspects do you think would be most interesting to your target audience?
- which aspects will most help you stand out (e.g. as they are uncommon or sought-after)?
- what is not essential – what, when deleted, does not change the impact or impression of your brand?

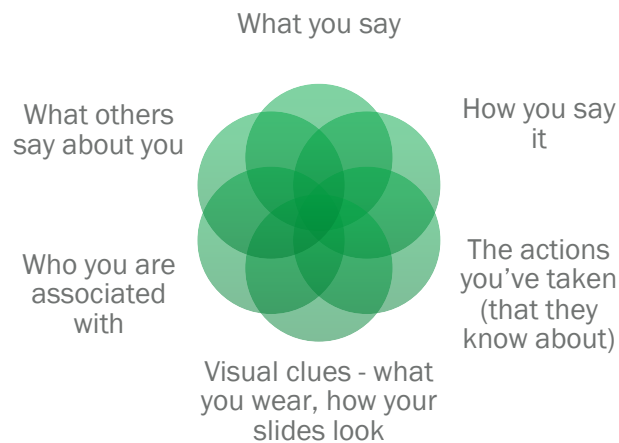
If possible, ask for feedback from others on what they perceive your strengths and interests are, and whether this matches the points you identified.

Step 4. Communicate your brand

Develop a short summary ('elevator pitch') of your brand that you can quickly adapt / use in different situations. Example:

- I am a cell biologist who uses ___ approach to understand _____. During my postdoc at EMBL, I have established a method ___, which enabled us to _____. I'm also an open science advocate, and am an early career board member for ASAPbio.
- Ensure that your brand comes across in:
 - Your online presence
 - If you have twitter/X – try to incorporate the brand in your bio, and in what you choose to tweet/re-tweet about.
 - If you have a personal website, include your elevator pitch – or expand this into a full biography that emphasises the key aspects of your brand (see appendix overleaf for help writing a bio).
 - Talks you give:
 - Start your talk with a one-sentence intro that incorporates your research interests 'e.g. My research interests are in..... Today, I will talk about my postdoc work on....'
 - Consider how to reflect the other aspects of your brand. For example, if part of your brand focuses on your commitment to mentoring, make sure to mention any students who were involved in your projects.
 - Your interactions with people
 - Prepare a short elevator pitch to introduce yourself when you attend conference networking sessions and other events.
 - Get comfortable asking questions about topics that interest you.
 - Your application materials
 - The key points of your brand should be emphasised in your coverletter, and your CV and research statement should also reflect these points.

A personal brand is what people remember about you. Their impression is influenced by multiple things:



Visual clues can also support the memorability of your brand and research persona. Visual components could include a consistent colour scheme, something visual that you always wear (for example, a piece of jewellery that links to your research topic) or something else (e.g. one of our webinar speakers mentioned she often uses cats on your slides). Working on the visual branding in your communications is an optional extra, that can be particularly effective for people who enjoy and are good at design.

APPENDIX. Writing a biography

If you will establish a website to support your application materials, you may want to include a biography.

Consider:

- Seeking inspiration by looking for biographies of your scientific role models on their academic websites or conference programmes.
- Combining different building blocks to make your own structure that matches your *brand, audience, and platform*.

Example building blocks (can be combined in different orders & you do not need to include all of them!)	
Intro	
Building block	Example(s)
Introduction 1-sentence on your current role – note that you can choose how to define yourself.	I am a postdoc in xxx lab I am a genomics researcher
Past experience	
Building block	Example(s)
Academic training overview <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Short summary of academic training – normally mentions institutions, may also include subject areas, dates & supervisors.	“I obtained my PhD in Bioinformatics from the University of Salzburg on machine learning models for genomics data analysis.”
Summary of experience / accomplishments <ul style="list-style-type: none">• For academic research profiles: a narrative or (rarer) bullet points outlining key research accomplishments	“During my postdoc, I developed an improved method for the analysis of cell surface composition and identified Gros, a negative regulator of mTOR, as a novel marker of pancreatic stem cells.”
Interests	
Building block	Example(s)
Short professional interests statement <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1-2 sentences that summarize your research interests	“My current work focuses on understanding the biophysics and dynamics of vesicle trafficking, and how this is modified in response to cellular stress.” “I develop and apply Bayesian models and scalable inference methods to biology”

<p>Continued overleaf Longer description of current research focus (possibly including techniques)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The first example uses the 'ABT technique' (: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We know a something about lcrnAs AND what seems to be important for their function. BUT we have no idea how this works THEREFORE we investigate this. The second gives a background and then has the 'why' And the third is short and to the point. <p>Which structure do you prefer?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Many long non-coding RNAs form triplex structures with DNA and recruit chromatin modifiers to specific loci. Conserved RNA pseudoknots are implicated in this process. However, the molecular mechanisms driving these interactions are poorly understood. Therefore, our group combines a multiomics approach with atomic force microscopy techniques to understand the role of pseudoknots in lncRNA function. Our research aims to elucidate the critical structural elements in lncRNA function. In particular, we are interested in pseudoknots, a conserved element in many lncRNAs, including the tumour suppressor MEG3. This work will contribute to our understanding of how lncRNAs contribute to spatial control of gene expression during development. My research aims to uncover the structural elements essential for lncRNA function, using multiomics approaches and atomic force microscopy. <p><i>Acknowledgements: these texts were written with the assistance of ChatGTP.</i></p>
<p>Summary of 'service' & non-research interests</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I review for / am active member of the Society of xxx. My other interests include.. In parallel to my research activity, I apply my passion for art to support science communication. Here it is a portfolio of my scientific illustrations:
<p>Personality + drive</p>	
<p>Building block</p>	<p>Example(s)</p>
<p>Story telling: your driving motivation</p>	<p>Since falling in love with live cell imaging during my undergraduate thesis, I have worked in projects spanning immunology to neurosciences. A common theme to my work has been applying advanced microscopy techniques to answer fundamental biological questions.</p>

- Examples of different building blocks can be found on the following pages

Imprint

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