



Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

Episode 33: Improving Your Visibility at Work without Cringey Self-Promotion

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JUNE 2024

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Rachel Dikovics: Welcome to the Women's Initiative Network Real Talk. I'm Rachel Dikovics, one of your co-hosts. I'm an associate in Lowenstein Sandler's White Collar Criminal Defense Practice Group.

Megan Monson: Hi, I'm Megan Monson. I'm a partner in Lowenstein Sandler's Executive Compensation Employment and Benefits Practice group.

Nicole Fulfree: I'm Nicole Fulfree a partner in Lowenstein's Bankruptcy and Restructuring Department.

Kristin Taylor: And I'm Kristen Taylor, a partner at Lowenstein's Tax and Private Client Services Groups.

Rachel Dikovics: So today we're going to be talking about self-promotion, and this is something we talk about a lot at our women's initiative meetings, but to be honest, it really hasn't become all that much easier for me throughout the course of my own career. So we've started looking into why self-promotion was so awkward for us, and what we found was really interesting. Studies reveal that women are consistently more reluctant than men to publicize their professional achievements.

And one of the most important findings in these studies is that it's not due to a lack of confidence, which is what I think many people in otherwise hearing that fact, would attribute that to. But in fact, they actually found that a self-promotion gender gap persists, even when women know that they have done better than others. In other words, women are less likely than men to self-promote even when they clearly perform better than others. And this blew my mind, so today, we're going to get to the bottom of it. Is there a self-promotion gender gap, and if so, where does it come from, but more importantly, how do we fix it?

So I'm going to get started with a hot topic. We've all seen them on LinkedIn, these posts where people talk about their professional accomplishments and say they're proud and humble to announce that dot, dot, dot. I want to know what everyone thinks about these kinds of posts.

Megan Monson: So I think sometimes that sort of narrative isn't needed or whatever they're talking about, right? If somebody's sharing an article or sharing an award they received, you can convey the same message by sharing whatever posts.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah. I also think the phrasing of, "proud and humbled", it's interesting that you feel the need to, one, this is something you're really proud of, but at the same time you want to convey to everybody that you don't have a big head about it. It's just as easy to, as you say, just repost the thing to draw attention to it and say, "Here's what I did." You don't have to philosophize about your accomplishment.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah, I think it's okay to be proud of some accomplishments without being humbled by them necessarily. I think we over humble ourselves.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, I think that's the problem with it. I think the humbled is just overused at this point and people don't really mean it. And so I feel like that's when it starts to get a little bit annoying. But yeah, overall, I think that if you're sharing it and you do it in a way that doesn't come off as showboat or bragging about it and you're really just proud of your accomplishments, I think it's fine to do.

Megan Monson: Yeah, I think that just requires being a little bit more thoughtful about how you pass along that message.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah, totally agree. So I think one of the assumptions of our conversation today is that self-promotion is good professionally. And so before we dive in further, I want to get your opinions on this threshold question. Is self-promotion really required in our professional lives or you can rely on others promoting you.

Megan Monson: So I'll give the stereotypical lawyer answer, it depends. I think it really depends on the facts and circumstances and the people involved. So just by way of example, sometimes I think self-promotion may be warranted, in particular in the workplace setting, if you're letting your boss or supervisor know of something great that you did, that they may just not be otherwise aware of that you've been involved with. And sometimes that's letting them know, "Hey, I was nominated for this award," in a not bolstering way, or that, "I got this feedback from a client on this deal," just because they may not have visibility into those things. Well, I personally try to promote others so that they don't feel the need to do that. Just sometimes there's a context and the need to do so. And again, I think it all goes back to the messaging and the way that you do it.

Rachel Dikovics: I think it's important to keep in mind what your goals are when you're thinking about self-promotion. Self-promotion for its own sake, just to go around and broadcast to any audience that will listen that you've accomplished

something and how great you are, it's unlikely to lead to any real strategic result that you might be aiming for.

So it's a good idea to keep in mind what your goals are and who needs to know about the work that you've done and who needs to know about your performance in order to achieve those goals. And then tailor your promotion accordingly in terms of relying on other people to promote you. Obviously, it's great when you have a network of people who you can rely on to signal boost your efforts, but at the end of the day, no one is going to care about your advancement and your accomplishments as much as you do, so.

Nicole Fulfree: Maybe your mom.

Rachel Dikovics: Maybe, yes

Kristin Taylor: Yeah, my mom's not going to help me make partner. Yeah, so I think you do have to keep it in mind somewhat, but it's really important to keep track of your audience so that you're not viewed as a blow hard in most things.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah, audience really matters.

Kristin Taylor: Yeah.

Rachel Dikovics: Totally. And so does context. I think in the same way that Kristen's saying, think about what you're trying to get out of it, what you're writing about yourself in, for example, a self-assessment as part of your review is probably going to be a pretty different description compared to what you're going to put in a LinkedIn post. Because in one context you need somebody to know everything that you've accomplished. In another context, most of the time, you probably don't really need people to know. And if you're sharing something, it's because the goal is external engagement. If your goal is internal engagement or internal recognition, then there's really no point promoting in that way or in that context.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, and that brings up a point that I was thinking about too. We're attorneys, marketing is a part of what we do, and so any awards that we achieve or good results that we get for our clients, that's something that we often work with marketing to put on our bios and that's an important part of what we do in our outward facing marketing. And so that's obviously, a good place for it.

And this reminds me of one of the points that was made in the article, one of the articles that we relied on for this discussion and our source materials will be linked in the notes of this episode. But in looking at more than 100,000 clinical research articles indexed on PubMed, which is a database of life sciences and biomedical literature, researchers observe that male scientists are more likely to use superlatives like unique and unprecedented to describe their work, as opposed to their female counterparts. And they noticed that the repercussions were pretty consequential. People's characterizing results with glowing superlatives were much more likely to get cited in further publications. And so you have to think about the way that you talk about

yourself and talk about your work because there are real life consequences for sure.

Rachel Dikovics: So guys, answering the first two questions. You brought up messaging a couple times, and so I think there's certainly a right way and a wrong way to self-promote, regardless of whether you're a man or a woman. And just in your professional experience, have you ever seen someone promote themselves and particularly graceful or not so graceful way.

Nicole Fulfree: I think a really graceful way to promote yourself is to simultaneously be promoting somebody else, whether that's someone who's reporting to you on a particular matter, maybe they did a really good job on something, and you edited it and you forward the whole thing to the partner and say, "So-and-so did a great first draft. My edits are in the attached," whatever. If you're making a public post, I think it's really important for people to be including the whole team. When you're having a public conversation about something you've accomplished it's not really fair to the junior people on a team to not be included in something like that. And I've seen a lot of women tend to be more inclusive, I think, in those things.

But at the same time, I've also seen women completely take credit for something that they had no hand in doing. So I think it can be an individual thing, but to me, being inclusive is the best way to self-promote in a gentle way. To not only be promoting yourself but promoting others at the same time.

Kristin Taylor: I think it creates a little bit of a feedback loop too. If you're generous and gracious with your praise of other people when warranted, they tend to be more aligned to do the same for you, and you create this really positive network of promotion. And I think in addition to having the value of self-promotion, it also shows you as a leader, a mentor, a team player. And so there's a lot of other attributes and positive things that can be conveyed by doing it in that type of constructive way.

Nicole Fulfree: And I think doing it even when you're not promoting yourself, because then it just shows you're in the habit of saying these positive things about people. Every time something great was done by the junior associate on your team, if you're sending it to the partner every time, then in one out of 10 times when you're forwarding something about yourself, it's not going to seem like you're-

Kristin Taylor: Unusual, right.

Nicole Fulfree: ... Like it's just kind of-

Kristin Taylor: Genuine.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, exactly.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah. One thing that I've seen, for example in interviews that I've done, I've seen people explain very similar accomplishments that they've achieved. One person saying, "I did this. I was a crucial part in this. I was the sole

contributor to this," as opposed to someone else who explains a situation like you guys have said, gives credit to others, maybe talks about the adversity they face in reaching the goal.

I think it makes it seem a little bit more human and they're not just saying like, "I'm the best," but they're saying, "It was really hard, but I worked hard with my team and was able to achieve this goal, which I'm really proud of." And I think that makes it a little bit more relatable as opposed to just like, "I did this because I'm the best person in the world."

Megan Monson: And I think a little bit the more believable too, they're the best at X, Y, Z. Maybe they are, maybe they aren't, but if they're giving you the context and telling you how they achieved said goal, I think that to your point of, well, it makes it more relatable but certainly more understandable and you can respect them more.

Rachel Dikovics: That's actually a good point that you bring up, Megan, because I think in the internal conversation following the interview, that was my first example where the person was saying, "I, I, I," almost the immediate response of the group was, "Was he really?"

And so I think that's a really important piece because then you're saying you did everything all by yourself and make people question it.

Megan Monson: That fires on that, maybe of the self-promotion that you're trying to achieve.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah, for sure. Okay, so I want to get to what I see as the heart of the conversation. In your professional experience, do you agree that there's a gender gap in self-promotion? And if you do, why do you think that this might be?

Megan Monson: I think women tend to be their harshest critic and therefore, may find it not always across the board, but may find it more difficult to shout their praises and expect that keep your head down, do good work. People will notice. And again, while that may not be true for everybody, I know myself personally and others I've spoken to about this, it's a little bit more uncomfortable to be pushing yourself out there and promoting yourself.

Kristin Taylor: Yeah, I think that at least for some women, we're socialized in a way that can be different from our male counterparts, particularly in our right to occupy space and to claim space for ourselves. I think far fewer men are socialized in a way that causes them to question their right to be in the room. And when you're starting from a baseline of, "I have to prove myself in order to even be here and be part of the conversation," it can be hard to get to a place in your mind where you're comfortable saying, "Oh, I've accomplished something above the ordinary." When you're fighting just for your right to take the next breath, it can be a little difficult to get comfortable with the idea of saying, "No, I actually excelled at doing this."

Nicole Fulfree: And I think, a lot of us faced that imposter syndrome that we've spoken about in the past, and I think that's related to that from the place we're coming from.

You kind of have a little bit of a fun house mirror version of how you've gotten to achieve whatever goals you have.

Kristin Taylor:

I do want to know, however, that it can not just be a gender related socialization. I do think that different cultures have different approaches to the idea of succeeding as an individual rather than as part of a team or as part of a group. And if you're someone, male or female, who's been socialized in a culture that is not American even realize, it's being, as a Canadian myself, the level of self-promotion that is normal here would be seen by my family back home in Canada as being almost unbearably overbearing. And the United States is a melting pot of a lot of different cultures. And so even people who've grown up in America may have different socialization, regardless of gender, that impacts how comfortable they are putting themselves forward as the sole person responsible for an accomplishment.

Rachel Dikovics:

I definitely think that's true. In the Harvard study that we'll refer to in our show notes, it mentioned that some have theorized that because women place a higher value on people in relationship, that they might be hesitant to dwell on their own achievements if they think it might alienate their less successful colleagues. And I actually think this really rang true for me because I think that women are socialized to think that it's more appealing to be part of a team or working together and not to be the one that's out front getting all the glory for whatever successes a team has. We work as lawyers and on a daily basis, are dealing with a lot of different people that have egos. And it's something that I, as a woman, am very aware of, I think probably hyper aware of, and how I portray myself in all the kinds of different interactions.

And so I definitely think that there was some truth to this concept about women placing higher value on people and relationships and that maybe being something that holds us back as far as promoting ourselves.

Nicole Fulfree:

Yeah. I think people, women especially, hold back when they think something they're going share about themselves is maybe to make other people feel bad about themselves in comparison, whereas I don't think men as often have that reaction or sometimes might enjoy that reaction that they're going to seem a lot better than somebody else in comparison. But I think for women, it's kind of a source of anxiety that, if I share this particular accomplishment, my friends and colleagues who haven't done X, Y, Z are going to feel bad that they haven't done that so maybe I'll just keep it to myself.

Rachel Dikovics:

Which is a perfect segue to the next question that I wanted to ask you guys, which is about a post from the Rent the Runway CEO and co-founder and board chairwoman, Jennifer Hyman. She shared a LinkedIn post related to this topic in connection with International Women's Day this year where she shared her experience in having received more positive affirmation and congratulatory sentiment, sharing the news of the birth of her third child than she did when she IPO'd Rent the Runway in 2021. And so her theory was, that we as a society celebrate women more for personal accomplishments than for professional ones. And so I want to know what you guys think about this, and either way, is there maybe something more behind how women

perceive other women's accomplishments? Is this an instance of women on women violence or otherwise, what do you guys think?

Megan Monson: Part of it is the relatability factor that a lot more people can understand and relate to personal accomplishments, whether or not it's something they experience, but it's just something more commonplace, versus somebody who's not in that industry or who doesn't run their own company, may not realize how much is involved in IPO and a company.

And so from that perspective, I think just a lot more people can understand and recognize and relate to the birth announcement.

Nicole Fulfree: I totally agree with that. I mean, I think it depends on who you're talking about. So if you have your professional circle of friends, maybe they're going to understand more about an accomplishment in your field, whereas your broader circle of friends will say congratulations, but not really maybe understand what the significance of a particular accomplishment is. And I mentioned before, like your mom cares about your career advancement. That's, I think, true in a general sense, but if your mom is not in the same career as you, she's not going to understand what you're doing and neither is anybody else. But most women have children at some point and just talking about women, but this applies to everybody really. Most people have children, and I totally agree with Megan that the relatability factor is huge because whatever career you're in, you understand the emotions that accompany the birth of a child, a child growing up, having another child, if those are things you've experienced.

And most people do experience those things at some point, whereas most people don't experience making partner as an attorney.

Kristin Taylor: Yeah. There's also the important point that the birth of a child represents the birth of an entirely separate human being who the people congratulating you may have some kind of personal relationship with as well. So people congratulating you on the birth of a child aren't necessarily saying, "Good job." Some of them are, but a lot of the time too, the people who are going to be congratulating you on that are people who are excited at the fact that there's this new human being.

Rachel Dikovics: Right. Yeah, they're happy for themselves too.

Kristin Taylor: Yeah.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah. And I think also there's something to be said for this particular comparison, being apples and oranges. IPOing a company is a massive personal accomplishment, having a baby is an accomplishment on a personal level, but is a very common experience. And so to me, they're just so different that to say they're not equivalent doesn't mean that one is more valuable than the other. It's just that they have nothing to do with each other. But you could say the same about lots of personal and professional accomplishments. They're just kind of completely different categories of life milestones and some are more relatable than others.

Rachel Dikovics: So, okay, I see what you guys are saying, and I'll put on the record that obviously, I think having the baby is a more important accomplishment.

Nicole Fulfree: I'm feeling like Rent the Runway is amazing. I'm a subscriber. I have been for years, and I think it's amazing. Obviously, they're not really equivalent things, but I think what she's getting at is something a little bit deeper here. And I wonder what you guys think because is there something about women when you see another woman's professional accomplishments, and I'm not necessarily saying the people in this room, but are some people hesitant to congratulate other women for their professional accomplishments potentially because of what it says about their own personal and or career choices?

Kristin Taylor: I wonder how much of that is real and how much of that is falling into the typical stereotypes of, women are always in competition with each other, and women don't really support other women. I mean, I certainly can see people going back to what Rachel was saying earlier, while maybe a woman might hesitate to post about their accomplishment because they're worried that it will make other women feel bad, but I don't know that it necessarily would.

I mean, I don't personally, I think it's great. Somebody else has an accomplishment that's great, man or woman, it doesn't really matter. And so I wonder how much of that is we're afraid of the judgment of other women, as opposed to, because socialized with this idea of the jealous woman. We perceive women are jealous and they're jealous of each other and they're in competition with each other. We see that in the media, we see that in the social story that's told, but I don't know how true that actually is, and how much of that is just that internalized fear of judgment that's not really coming from other women, it's coming from the larger society. And it has less to do with jealousy and more to do with perceived violation of social.

Megan Monson: And I think on the social norms aspect of things, I think it's also more likely, again, it might just be me, but if I see a woman that I work with or I've worked with in a professional setting, I'm much more likely to say something about her professional accomplishments versus somebody else who just happens across my news feed, versus who's had a baby now that I've recently had a child, like that post.

So I think it just had them go back to, there may not be a nefarious reason behind choosing to not engage with somebody or commenting on it. It might be how you're wired and what you feel comfortable with, based also on your relationship or interaction with that person.

Nicole Fulfree: Right. And how do you connect with people. It's kind of this universal connection. I find myself now commenting on random influencers' Instagram posts about their pregnancy announcement being like, "I'm so happy for you," and I am genuinely happy for them because I can imagine the feelings that they're experiencing because I've experienced them, but I can't necessarily imagine how they feel when they hit 100,000 subscribers. But I hope we hit 100,000 subscribers for the podcast, but I haven't been through that experience, so I don't know what they're feeling in the same way.

Rachel Dikovics: Bringing it back to that relatability point.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, exactly.

Rachel Dikovics: It's a lot more comfortable to reach out to somebody and congratulate them on something that you feel like you understand.

Nicole Fulfree: Correct.

Rachel Dikovics: And I personally think that if you're happy and comfortable with where you are in your life, whether it's as a mom or as a professional, I think it's probably much easier. And I think that's probably why you guys are answering the way that you are, because when you're at a point where you're satisfied with the life path that you've chosen, it's much easier to support other people, no matter what their accomplishments are or personally or professionally.

Nicole Fulfree: Oh, wait. We're supposed to feel comfortable about our professional and personal. But I take your point.

Rachel Dikovics: So in closing, how do we as women get better at self-promotion? I'm not saying that we have all the answers, but do you guys have any tips that you can share for getting a little bit more comfortable with this obviously awkward self-promotion?

Nicole Fulfree: I like the idea of trying to be objective when you can and just state the facts. LinkedIn post I mentioned earlier, I just tried to make it really short and not anything braggy because it was just to share something I wrote. And I think doing that is helpful, and I find the same thing when I'm writing out my self-assessment in my review. If I just stick to facts, use examples, it feels a lot more comfortable than making these grandiose general statements that maybe I could or couldn't back up. I think if you just provide evidence of what you're saying, it becomes a lot more.

Megan Monson: Another thing you could do is enlist the help of allies. So for example, if you have other friends that you've worked with and you put a new episode of your podcast out and maybe letting one of your friends know that it came out, maybe they'll post on your behalf. People that you have a comfortable relationship with, because I think, as we've talked about throughout this episode, self-promotion is great, but it also can be great if it's coming from somebody else's mouth and somebody who would be willing to sing your praises and again, not in a showy way, could speak volumes.

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah, and I think if you do that for others too, then they'll get the idea and do it for you. And I know I've had an award that I won one time, and I know before I think the firm even posted it, Rachel posted it and said, "Blah, blah, blah, my friend Nicole," and it was awesome because I obviously really appreciated what she said, but then I didn't have to do the awkward thing about posting it myself, which I just didn't feel comfortable doing. So that was really appreciated.

Yeah, I think it all goes back to women helping women, I mean, helping up any of our professional colleagues, but really, especially women. Yeah,

helping one another, and helping each other get to the next level and when they do, being happy for them.

Kristin Taylor: Yeah. And I think you can start with baby steps, the re-share of an article that's been posted by your company or that you've worked on, that's easy. You don't even have to write an intro. You might feel like you have to, you don't, you can just reshare it. You're getting it out to your own network, and that can be really helpful. Another thing that I think can help overcome a little bit of the imposter syndrome that holds you back, is whenever you get an email with particularly good feedback from a client, from a coworker, save it in a separate folder and keep that folder for when you are in a situation where you do have to self-promote because it gives you that factual basis. It reminds you of, oh, that project that you worked on, that you actually did perform in a way that you want to highlight.

And it also gives you a little bit of a confidence boost before you have to enter into a situation where you are going to have to do that uncomfortable thing of self.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah, it's much easier to say, "So-and-so, GC of the client said, I'm the best tax attorney in the world," as opposed to just saying, "I'm the best tax attorney in the world, which you are."

Kristin Taylor: Be women helping women.

Rachel Dikovics: There you go. We hope you enjoyed this episode of the Women's Initiative Network Real Talk. We'll see you again next time.

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