

Canada, warns students that they must have a home department. This “gives them full citizenry in terms of access to financial and physical resources”, says the programme’s website. And when they complete their graduate studies, students are “strongly advised to be strategic about their post-doctoral placement, since most must find a job in an existing more traditional field”.

FRINGE BENEFITS

Despite the caveats, pursuing a course that defies traditional boundaries can still yield valuable, if subtle, benefits. Sam Hay, a biophysicist at the University of Manchester, wasn’t intent on interdisciplinary studies when he sought a postdoctoral position five years ago, but the MIB was one of the only places hosting research that really interested him: studying the quantum mechanics of biological reactions. “There was a lab set up and running, doing what I wanted to do,” says Hay. But “the best things about it are the sort of things you don’t really expect”, he adds.

Those unexpected benefits include communal spaces and seminar programming designed to foster the creative intermingling of ideas. “You walk into a seminar or lecture and realize it’s somebody working on a technique that’s a hell of a lot better than the one you’ve been trying to wrap your data around,” says Hay. That atmosphere, he says, contributed to the success of his postdoc. Last September, he received a coveted academic fellowship at the biocentre, an entry route to the equivalent of a tenure-track research position. “There are quite a few people floating around here that don’t obviously fit in any one department,” says Hay. “Ultimately, time will tell whether this is a fad, but I suspect it probably won’t be.”

Fattaey laughs when asked whether the concept of interdisciplinary training is gaining in popularity. “Today I have already talked to three groups that want to do this on a daily basis,” she says, citing delegations from South Korea, Belgium and Denmark. She also lists universities or consortia in five US states that have requested her advice on launching programmes similar to Bio-X.

Even sceptics concede that the increase in popularity could pay dividends for graduate students and postdocs. “People who establish interdisciplinary degrees are also more likely to hire people with interdisciplinary degrees,” says Bozeman. Fattaey foresees a thriving network of like-minded universities and researchers, further adding to the talent pool and job prospects. “We’re not going anywhere if all of us don’t work together,” she says. ■

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COLUMN

Scientists for sale

There are ways for researchers to sell themselves — but they shouldn’t overdo it, says **Mariano A. Loza-Coll**.

It all started well. At an interview for a faculty position, a colleague of mine provided an account of his work as a postdoc. Afterwards, a member of the recruiting committee praised him and provided feedback on his presentation. Then he said it: “Great job, but you should sell yourself better.”

When I was growing up in Argentina, before the advent of online commerce, people would place empty cans on the roofs of their cars to indicate that a vehicle was for sale. When I hear stories like my friend’s, I chuckle at the thought of showing up to job interviews with an empty plum-tomato tin on my head.

I’ve heard the sales argument before. As scientists, we need to ‘sell our work’ (or, my favourite, we need to ‘make it sexy’). I get what that means; we need to highlight the most salient findings and implications of our work without hiding its caveats and limitations. Instead, we should turn them into mere blemishes under the flattering light of our discoveries.

But how should we go about that? Or, more importantly, how can we avoid overdoing it? When I hear that I need to sell my work, my grant proposal and even myself, I can’t shake the fear that if I push too hard, I will start sounding like the proverbial used-car salesman.

I decided to approach the question as any sensible scientist would: I googled ‘key steps to a successful sale’. A few tips caught my eye, because scientists tend to overlook them. They can be used when applying for a faculty position or research grant, or when pitching a paper to an academic journal.

First, be realistic and make sure that your product fits the needs of your target audience. Sales associates understand that they will not be able to sell everything to everyone. I don’t only mean trim the sub-par science; a tough sale won’t always be overcome by polishing your product. Even your most elegant science may not fly with an audience ‘not in the market’ for it, so be sure to pick your target wisely.

Second, a sales meeting is a conversation. All the tips I found stressed that the salesperson must listen to potential buyers to understand

their needs. It might seem obvious, but it got me thinking about how often we scientists make the process mostly about ourselves (my CV, my publications, my recommendation letters, me, me, me...). Some experts even advise forcing the conversation if it isn’t part of the

interview or application process. For example, they might arrange a series of phone interviews to get to

know their ‘buyers’ — the hiring committee, the grant makers, the journal editors — before the interview or submission. But remember that looking up faculty members online doesn’t count as a conversation.

Finally, explain clearly what will happen after the sale. Buyers need to know how

they will put you, the product, to use. Think of yourself as a new printer. Are you ‘upgradable’? Your prospective employers might want to know how easily you can scale your lab up or down, or move it between floors or buildings if necessary. They may also appreciate knowing that you’re ready to lecture on several subjects at a moment’s notice. Do you come with a ‘service contract’? Try to demonstrate that you can count on a network of collaborators in case of problems. What are your ‘consumables’? If your research involves the use of unconventional materials, make sure that you show that you have thought carefully about how to secure them. Do you come with ‘pre-installed drivers’? Be honest about what you need to get started. It’s best to tell your department about the particle accelerator you’ll need in your basement before the fleet of moving trucks arrives.

These universal sales principles won’t apply to every case, but they could come in handy, especially in a tough job market or funding climate. Of course, should everything else fail, you can always break out the car-salesman routine. Look the search-committee members squarely in the eye, give them your widest grin and ask, “Say, what will it take for me to get this job today?” ■

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