

By Jeffrey J. McDonnell

# Creating a research brand

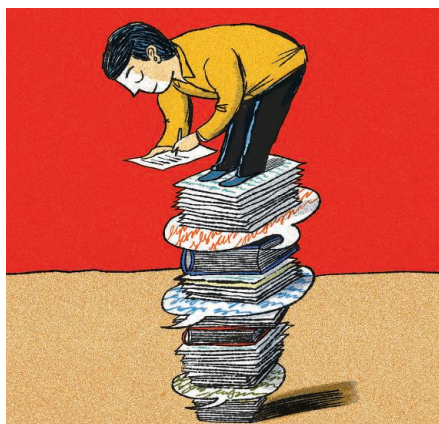
In my first few years beavering away on the tenure track, I flitted from one research question to another. In an undisciplined pursuit of funding, I wasted my energies—and, sadly, papers—on unrelated topics. I began to understand how a successful research program worked only after I became an associate professor at another university. I realized from observing others that it was critical to find one's focus and voice and have it heard—quickly. Now, when my own students and post-docs ask me how they can stand out among the many young scientists jockeying for position and positions, I tell them to learn from my early struggles, and to define their research brand identity.

A research brand identity, in the best scientific sense, is your central mission: the particular branch of research you'd like to be truly excellent in and known for. Equal parts research focus and career vision, a brand identity is a map of a few key subareas where you strive to make a difference over a sustained period. By crafting a research brand, you make it clear to others how they should define you, and you help them remember who you are and what you do.

As a young hydrologist, I worked on topics as varied as soil erosion, snow physics, and the remote sensing of water uptake by plants. When I finally found my focus, I concentrated on three simple questions: Where does water go when it rains? What pathway does it take to the stream? How old is the water in our streams? At first these questions were narrow; I explored just beyond the boundaries of my thesis work, in a space where I had established some credibility. Over time the questions broadened. I now explore where plants get water and the role of geology in defining water storage and release. These core issues have sustained me over my career.

The trick is to find the optimal research brand width: too broad and you blend in with others and lack a niche to carve out; too narrow and you seem too limited. You want some connection to your adviser's research brand, but you also want to move in a new direction that honors your unique skills. The old adage "only do what only you can do" can be helpful as you ponder this.

After you have identified your brand identity, getting it out into the world is relatively straightforward: Get good results, publish papers, and give talks that all map to your theme. But there is much more. The first step is describ-



***“Get good results, publish papers, and give talks that all map to your theme.”***

Finally, a research brand identity remains helpful as you advance. As more opportunities come your way, your brand can help you filter them, keeping your main thing the main thing. The brand helps you determine what to say no to, a skill that becomes much more important as you grow more sought after over time. And just as a research brand identity is a way to describe your ambitions when you start out, it is also a way to sum up your body of work later in your career. ■

*Jeffrey J. McDonnell is a professor in the School of Environment and Sustainability at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada, and Sixth Century Chair at the University of Aberdeen in the United Kingdom. He is grateful to Maureen Reed for ongoing discussions and to his lab group for useful feedback. For more on life and careers, visit [sciencecareers.org](http://sciencecareers.org). Send your story to [SciCareerEditor@aaas.org](mailto:SciCareerEditor@aaas.org).*