

Case Study: Shaping Your Story



A radiologist in Massachusetts strives to rebrand radiology and winds up simultaneously building her own personal brand.

By Linda G. Sowers

Key Takeaways:

- A radiologist at the University of Massachusetts Medical School set out to change misperceptions of the specialty among medical students and clinical colleagues.
- By collaborating on a committee to create a curriculum focused on communicating with patients, she began rebranding radiology and also established a personal brand for patient communications.
- To expand her local brand as a radiology changemaker, she shares her passion for patient-centered care and diversity in radiology at the national level.

When Carolynn M. DeBenedectis, MD, associate professor of radiology and vice chair for education, set out to remake the perception of the radiology department at the University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMMS), she didn't realize she was simultaneously shaping her own story. "My personal brand came about because I wanted to rebrand the way people viewed radiology," she says. "I didn't see it as building my own 'brand.' Instead, I found something I was passionate about changing in radiology and set about doing that. Before I knew it, my enthusiasm for patient-centered care became my own brand."

For DeBenedectis, the initial goal was to reinvent how medical students and colleagues saw radiologists. "I wanted people to see that radiologists care for patients; we don't just sit in a dark reading room all day. That's where my personal brand in patient-focused care originally started. It came out of my love for radiology, my love of patients, and my love for wanting to further the field and make it a better place," she says. "Rebranding radiology in your organization opens doors for you to establish your own brand in a strong, unique way." (Learn more about how DeBenedectis and her colleagues at UMMS strengthened their department's brand in "Rebranding Radiology" at acr.org/Imaging3-RebrandingRadiology.)

What DeBenedectis serendipitously happened upon — personal branding — is what many business experts have been advocating for decades. As Tom Peters wrote in "The Brand Called You" in 1997, "You, everything you do — and everything you choose not to do — communicates the value and character of [your] brand." It's this concept that J. Mark Carr, MBA, president of Carr Consulting Group and adjunct lecturer at Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, lectures on for the Radiology Leadership Institute® (RLI). At a recent RLI Leadership Summit, he said, "Personal branding is about taking control of one's own image — just like a product or company would to achieve some professional or personal goal."

As DeBenedectis realized that she was developing a personal brand, she took more deliberate steps to become nationally recognized for her commitment to patient-centered care and, more recently, for extending



Carolynn M. DeBenedectis, MD, associate professor of radiology and vice chair for education, is working with medical students and residents to showcase the role radiologists play in patient care and the importance of honing excellent patient communication skills.

her personal brand into diversity, equity, and inclusion in radiology.

"Although my path could be considered to be 'accidental branding,' there's no doubt that my efforts to rebrand radiology have made a tremendous impact on my career trajectory. In addition to gaining national recognition, I was also recently named vice chair for education, the first female vice chair in the radiology department."

Starting Locally

To realize the benefits of a personal brand, it's helpful to know what constitutes as personal branding. As Amazon founder Jeff Bezos once said, "Your brand is what other people say about you when you're not in the room." And as Carr explains in his RLI Leadership Summit presentation: Personal branding is how others perceive you — a view derived from the actions you take to have "a significant and differentiated presence" in your profession.

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Anyone interested in developing a personal brand should start with an honest assessment of who they are and what they want to be known for, Carr says. They must ask themselves: What are my values? What makes me unique? What are my skills and competencies? Can my colleagues clearly articulate what I do and what I'm passionate about?

For DeBenedectis, those answers came easily. "I wanted our med students and hospital faculty to truly understand the value that radiologists bring to patient care and the critical role we play in communicating directly with patients and families," she says. "We're not just sitting on the sidelines reading scans; in many cases, we're at our patients' bedsides guiding them and their referring physicians to get the best care possible. I wanted to change the misconceptions that our med students and other care providers had about radiology."

To advance her passion, DeBenedectis began taking intentional steps to ensure her colleagues recognized radiology's contribution to patient care. She started showing up to medical student events — such as those focused on how to choose a specialty and how to apply to residency — to share her love for radiology and patient-centered care with students. UMMS radiology department chair, Max P. Rosen, MD, MPH, FACR, took notice of DeBenedectis' dedication to direct patient care and asked her to represent radiology on a UMMS committee that was developing a curriculum for communicating with patients. From there, her personal brand was born, and she has been building and evolving it ever since.

To start building a personal brand, DeBenedectis recommends a focused, step-by-step approach. "Start with one group, one goal," she says. "I was initially just trying to convince the committee that radiologists were key in communicating with patients. That's how personal branding begins. Be intentional about one idea and move it forward every day. Try to help people understand the unique value you bring to a particular issue. Be focused: one passion, one group, then go from there."

Building National Recognition

While DeBenedectis' leadership in patient communication skills started locally at her own institution, it wasn't long before her brand started gaining national recognition. "Personal branding goes beyond creating a name for yourself in your own organization; it's also about finding ways to get yourself out there so that people know you as an expert in the field," she explains. "Once you achieve success locally, publish a paper about it. Let everyone see it. For my patient- and family-centered care initiative, I published a paper in the *Journal of the American College of Radiology* about

our communication skills curriculum. When people read the paper and think of that topic, I believe they will think of my name."

After publishing about patient communications, DeBenedectis was invited to co-author additional articles with people involved in similar initiatives and research. "That builds your brand further because you're considered an expert by other people," she adds. "From there, I started getting invited to speak about patient-centered care at national conferences like those hosted by the Radiological Society of North America and the Association of University Radiologists. It catches like wildfire. If you work at it one step at a time, and it's a good idea, it will perpetuate itself."

As her reputation as a leader in patient-centered care grew, DeBenedectis discovered another path to bolster her personal brand: being invited to join a national committee. "A few years ago, the ACR asked me to join the Commission on Patient- and Family-Centered Care (acr.org/PFCCCommission)," she notes. "A key goal of our work has been to transform the UMMS communications curriculum into a national standard for training radiology residents in patient- and family-centered care."

DeBenedectis followed the same model to build a national reputation in another area as well: diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). As she focused on rebranding radiology in the medical school, she discovered a passion for getting more women to join the specialty. "One medical student that showed an interest in radiology got me into DEI. After initially showing interest in radiology, she decided it wasn't for her because she didn't see any young female role models in the field. After meeting me and other female radiologists, she changed her mind and decided to join the specialty after all."

DeBenedectis adds, "I collaborated with her to develop a radiology paper about her experience — "Do Interventions Intended to Increase Female Medical Student Interest in Radiology Work?"¹ — which led her to get even more excited about radiology, and she matched into the specialty. To advance my passion for getting more women in radiology, I then wrote a paper about the experience, which turned into a national presentation, which led to doing more projects and more papers on diversity in radiology. Based on all these efforts, Dr. Rosen nominated me to join LEAD, a women's leadership program. Now, more people know me for my brand as a diversity expert than for communication skills."

Once DeBenedectis started building her brand, she turned to social media to amplify it. "Social media is not the defining element of your brand," she emphasizes.

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“Twitter opens me up to a whole new world of people who follow me and want to talk to me as an expert in particular subjects. But I find that all the hard work of the papers, lectures at national conferences, and the committees are the most important vehicles to build personal branding. Based on my experience, social media helps you showcase your efforts to a wider audience. First, you have to find your brand and then use social media to perpetuate your brand.”

Leading Change

DeBenedectis' personal brand story started with her seeing opportunities for positive change — and then taking action to make them happen. She credits the RLI leadership programs with giving her the inspiration and tools to lead change locally and nationally. “Change is hard, and most people don't want to change, so you need leadership training to know how to go about it the right way,” she states. “They don't teach you those skills in medical school. The RLI and other leadership programs are imperative for every radiologist who wants to make things better — not only to advance themselves but also to advance the specialty.”

DeBenedectis has leveraged what she learned through the RLI to become an ambassador for change in radiology. As such, she was invited to share her approach to personal branding at the most recent RLI Leadership Summit, where she shared her secret to success: “Your brand has to come from the heart; it can't be something that's a cerebral decision. For me, it came because I love talking to patients. I love to show people how important radiologists are to patient care and how we are with them through some of their most vulnerable moments. And I'm equally passionate about getting more women into radiology. My journey shows how you can make a difference by building your brand.”

All radiologists, regardless of their titles and positions within their practices, can follow a similar approach to make change in their organizations. “It is imperative to empower all radiologists to become better leaders,” DeBenedectis says. “I was a junior faculty member, one of the newest in my department when I started taking steps to rebrand radiology. Never, in a million years would I have thought I'd be a leader in radiology. But everyone can be a leader. You're a leader just by wanting to change something and taking action. To improve things, you have to lead the charge. As radiologists, we must all be at the forefront of change to make things better for our patients and for the specialty.”

Endnotes

1. Yuan ED, Makris J, DeBenedectis CM. Do Interventions Intended to Increase Female Medical Student Interest in Radiology Work? Preliminary Findings. *Curr Probl Diagn Radiol*. 2018;47(6):382-386. doi:10.1067/j.cpradiol.2017.09.003

Next Steps

- Be intentional. Think about where your passions lie and how you want to change things for the better. Focus on one idea or group, then take actionable steps to reach your goals.
- Start locally and build a reputation as an expert in a particular area within your own organization. Then expand your brand by publishing papers, speaking at conferences, and participating in national committees to advance your passion. Use social media to amplify your brand.
- Gain leadership skills to learn how to effectively cultivate buy-in and make the changes you want to see in your group as well as the specialty.

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