

The Executive Woman's Guide to Self-Promotion

Ambitious women sometimes have a hard time getting noticed, but marketing one's accomplishments is a requirement for career advancement. Six female CIOs offer advice to up-and-coming women in IT and explain how they learned to network without compromising themselves.

By [Esther Schindler](#)

December 12, 2007 — [CIO](#) — To move up in any organization, IT professionals need to engage in a little marketing. Self-promotion isn't the crass skill of acting like a brazen minx, but rather gaining the interest and attention of others and, over time, earning their respect and trust. Reputation is everything for any would-be IT executive, and it's important to get it right.

However, some women must overcome aversions to self-promotion, conflict and voicing their opinion. "This has been difficult for me," admits Denise Stephens, the director of Information Technology and CIO at Washington Savannah River Company. "I must consciously conquer my natural tendency to hold back when interacting in conflict situations." Women can worry—occasionally with reason—that they'll be negatively labeled if they are assertive and speak out. "I keep this in mind but do not let it hold me back," says Stephens, "as I have rarely seen women penalized by these labels if they get the job done."

Your career is in your power. "Some women hold back because they don't think they can network or communicate on the same level as their male peers or management. Get over it," says Janis O'Bryan, CIO and senior vice president of IT at Hudson Advisors. "If you are good at what you do, and a professional, you can compete for the next level. Don't self-impose a glass ceiling."

Volunteer for Visible Assignments

You want to be appreciated and acknowledged for making a difference. That means you have to do something that has a visible effect—and also gives you the opportunity to shine.

Take charge of something visible, that people need, advises Magalene Powell-Meeks, Deputy CIO at [Jet Propulsion Laboratory](#) (JPL). "Put yourself in the position of solving a problem, and solve it for them," she says, "Even if it's a crappy job." Be the leader in that position, even if it's a small one, she says, and apply your unique technology or process to help those people. Become the go-to person in your discipline.

The momentum you build is more important than a fancy title, says Powell-Meeks. By helping your customer (whether that customer is internal to the company or an outside user), you build trust with your customer base—a big key to advancement. "Your reputation and your character are what sell you for the next big job," Powell-Meeks says.

Sometimes that means you have to stretch yourself and take on a role that scares you. It's worth it. Elizabeth Austin, vice president of IT Operations and Infrastructure at Family Dollar, believes her openness to new challenges offered her interesting opportunities to work in a variety of roles with each employer. "Many of the roles have been nontraditional for women. For example, I've worked in

construction and manufacturing business applications implementation and support roles. In my current role, I have operations and infrastructure responsibilities for a discount retailer, which have provided many opportunities for learning new technologies and the retail business environment."

Don't wait for opportunities to come to you. If there's no obvious way to gain recognition in your day-to-day work, find someplace where you can contribute. Cindy Hughes, CIO of Maryland Automobile Insurance Fund, has volunteered for corporate presentations, speaking to outside groups about the company or about what is going on in her department.

Stephens says, "Work can be like sports. As people are picking their teams, they want the known players who deliver. Become known as a player who delivers, and your opportunities will grow."

Reach Outside IT

That touches on another success factor shared by these woman CIOs: Don't huddle inside the IT department. As IT staff everywhere know far too well, when IT is working, it's invisible. To be noticed personally, you have to walk outside the data center.

Stephens urges ambitious women to volunteer for assignments that provide opportunities outside the usual working relationships. "This could be working on an enterprisewide initiative or working on something focused in another discipline," she explains. When Stephens was an IT manager, she took the opportunity to develop a section of her corporation's application to the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. "Although my assigned section had an information systems theme, working on this enterprise team exposed me to diverse functions and people throughout the corporation," she says.

Doing so helps you do your job effectively—how can it hurt to develop a cross-functional perspective on company goals, strategy and culture?—and also builds your reputation as someone who gets things done. And it sets you apart from typical IT professionals, who merely focus on their specific assignment and technical discipline.

Case in point: Early in Stephens's career, she took the opportunity to work outside her immediate organization, the marketing and sales arm of the company. "Through specific initiatives, I became known within that circle as someone who did whatever was necessary to support the customer and their marketing efforts. The relationships I formed led to more opportunities."

"If your management and peers trust your judgment and you deliver on your promises, you are 80 percent there," says O'Bryan. "The rest is relationships. Make time to get out of your office, use the phone or travel to network with the other people in the company. It is important to build relationships with all levels. Be the person with the answer."

Show Progress

It's one thing to achieve or exceed your goals—but you won't move ahead unless others notice the accomplishment.

Personal ambition aside, it's important to communicate what you and your team have done, especially given IT's tendencies toward invisibility to the rest of the enterprise. Nor is the challenge to find effective communication methods unique to gender, points out O'Bryan. "[At] a financial company, the key was

'speaking the language of the business.' This is the current buzz phrase in our industry, but it worked long before it became popular to say."

And that provides a major advantage to women (and men) trying to move ahead personally. While it may be—or at least feel—rude to toot one's own horn, publicizing the accomplishments of your department supports your team *and* helps the business learn what you're doing for the enterprise. One not-so-subtle result is that the Powers That Be notice who's leading such successful teams and give its manager (that would be *you*) more opportunities. Think of it this way: You gain visibility by giving it to others.

Powell-Meeks has made specific efforts in this regard and has created her own "branding." She regularly distributes products to communicate to her customers, such as an annual report to key stakeholders to show what the IT department accomplished—with tangible milestones, not just pie-in-the-sky stuff—and to summarize and remind people about the benefits IT can provide. "IT can be underground," she says, "like a utility or telephone."

The reports may need to be distributed more often, depending on your job. O'Bryan's department provides quarterly IT financial reports for the CFOs of each office worldwide, as well as quarterly peer comparison spending reports, an annual IT report and quarterly newsletters to promote the benefit of IT to the business.

These summaries promote the work, Powell-Meeks says. "Not me as a person, but the team." Yet savvy women know this is also a self-promotion and leadership opportunity. Says O'Bryan, "I have an opening statement in both [publications] that includes my picture. As our company grows, not everyone may know who I am—and I think it is important that they do."

"Nothing speaks louder than results, so you want to show that you can make a difference very early on and create the media to make sure many people are aware of this," says Mojgan LeFebvre, CIO of bioMerieux. "Communication is key and it should never come across as bragging." However, good communication goes a long way in establishing your brand. "Don't be shy about communicating widely on results you have achieved and accomplishments," says LeFebvre. Communicate as eloquently and as widely as possible on the achieved results, she urges, and continue to do this on a consistent and iterative basis.

Relationship building works downward as well as upward. While it's important to connect with people who can directly influence your career (a.k.a. promoting you) and who can help you—in marketer's terms, "build your brand"—some women have gained the most by taking care of the people who work for them.

Hughes was once was a midlevel manager who had recently been appointed to head up a unit that was troubled and underperforming—and one that no one really wanted. She got to know each of the 32 people in the section. "I acquired a sense of their technical skill levels—as I'm sure their prior managers had done, as well. But I also got to know them as individuals," she says. Within three days, Hughes knew each team member by name, and throughout that project's tenure, spoke with them daily (if briefly). "There were lots of interesting stories in the group, and I tried to hear as many of them as possible. I guess it had a pretty positive impact, because the group's productivity increased measurably, and senior level management noticed! My work with this particular group provided me a springboard into upper management promotions."

Be Assertive—But Not Pushy

Some women, anxious to get credit for their work, tilt too far in the wrong direction. They can become so aggressive that people tune them out. In doing so, points out Powell-Meeks, they forget that "we" is more powerful than "I."

One woman of Powell-Meeks's acquaintance, for example, is a very talented person who wants to get ahead and probably is CIO material. The woman is very smart technically, but, Powell-Meeks says, "She's always promoting herself, and she puts down her management for not recognizing her: 'Everybody else values me and my management doesn't.'" The result, unfortunately, is that everyone just wants the woman to go away. "She's complaining about her own team, so she won't get promoted there," says Powell-Meeks, but bad-mouthing her management ensures that nobody else wants her, either. "She is an 'I' person, not a 'we' person—and three other people execute what she plans and organizes," Powell-Meeks adds.

So, how do you strike a balance between assertiveness and a perception that's far less savory? It depends on where you work, cautions Powell-Meeks. "Learn the corporate culture. Let that guide how you express yourself."

Still, be yourself. Some women, says Powell-Meeks, need to be told, "'Don't minimize your role....' They have a lot to say after the meeting is over." Don't be afraid to express your opinion when it matters. Hughes adds, "I speak up in meetings, offering my ideas and opinions. I guess the secret there is to be straightforward and direct. A long time ago, I used to think it was important to 'follow the company line,' no matter what. I learned over time, however, that it's better—and I get attention—if I just relax and be who I am and say what I think."

Know your strengths, and use them to your advantage. "Through understanding my own strengths, weaknesses, and as important preferences, I have been able to optimize them in seeking opportunities," says Austin. "For example, I prefer roles combining management, customer-service focus, ongoing learning and problem-solving."

Don't limit yourself. "I've missed some opportunities in the past when I hesitated to reach beyond my comfort zone or waited for others to provide them for me," says Austin. "You have to believe in yourself, define what your goals are, then develop the relationships and opportunities for realizing them."

The women in this story are all members of the CIO Executive Council, a professional association of IT leaders founded by CIO magazine. The Council runs a networking and best-practice-sharing program for women IT executives. For more information on this program and Council membership, visit www.cioexecutivecouncil.com.