

Standing out from the crowd what's your USP?

When you are an integrated coach/therapist, how do you market yourself? **Jo Birch** and **Sarah Corrie** explore the dilemmas and offer advice to dual-trained practitioners on creating your brand and promoting your practice.

As coaches we offer services in an economic and professional climate characterised by unprecedented levels of unpredictability and volatility.¹ Moreover, this climate is changing faster than we are equipped to manage.² As global competition forces organisations to become fast, innovative and adaptable, those of us in the coaching profession have to become commercially smarter, while at the same time resisting the temptation to over-sell our skills.

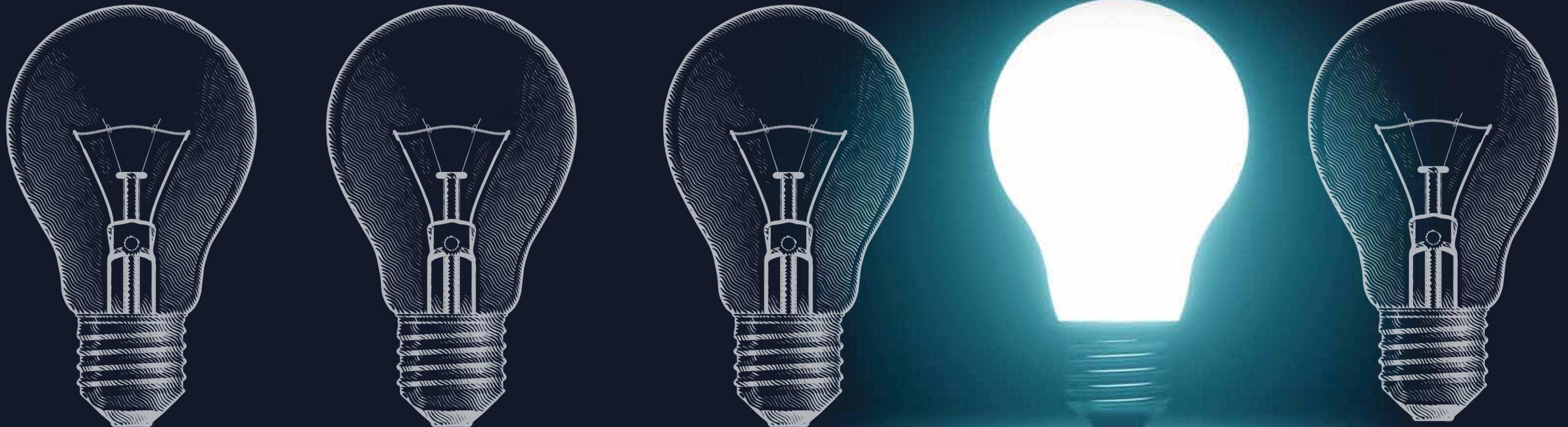
The organisations feeling the impact of this changing world are not just multinational

corporations; they include our UK health services, local authorities, national and local charities, communities, social businesses and small/medium sized enterprises. Coaches in all of these settings are called upon equally to develop a transparent identity – a way of describing our offer that acknowledges a particular expertise and how this is relevant to current market requirements.

In this context, navigating the fine line between over-selling and under-selling our services is a challenge – both for our coaching communities and for individual practitioners.

As the professional terrain of coaching continues to expand and more individuals enter the market claiming coaching skills among their competences, we all need to consider what is distinctive about our particular offer and how we communicate that to buyers of our services. Additionally, we need to consider how best we can communicate the very real benefits that coaching can provide without embellishing them with scientifically unsubstantiated claims. Ours is still an emerging field of professional practice, characterised by many unanswered questions.

Engaging with these issues is particularly important for the emerging body of dual-trained practitioners: that is, those who have come to the work of coaching through another core profession with extensive prior training and credentialing in the field of psychological understanding, such as applied psychology, counselling and psychotherapy. For reasons we will explore here, dual-trained practitioners may be at particular risk of under-selling their contribution in the market place, to their own possible detriment as well as that of their clients.





Develop a way of recording client feedback – especially where outcomes have been particularly favourable... What do your clients really appreciate about your contribution?



In writing this article, we consider three main questions.

- 1 What do we notice about self-promotion in our context, and what challenges might we encounter?
- 2 What are the distinctive features of dual-trained practitioners?
- 3 How can we gain competence in identifying our unique selling points (USPs)?

In exploring the unique position of dual practitioners in coaching, we do not seek to diminish the kaleidoscope of experience brought by other coaches in the field. Rather, our focus is on clarifying how, in an over-crowded marketplace, dual practitioners might seek to differentiate themselves, celebrate what they can bring to the coaching enterprise and promote their unique services to buyers of coaching. Buyers want to know which types of coaching work best with which types of client. The more accurate we can be in describing our offer, the greater the chances that we will achieve 'best fit' with our clients.

1 Self-promotion and challenges

As dual-trained coaches we hold the complex dilemma of being fully in the therapeutic context, fully in the coaching context and also fully in this unique, combined space that is difficult to define. One of our challenges is to move away from an identity that narrows the definition of who we are and move towards one that embraces an inclusive identity.

For one of us (JB), this challenge was captured in a recent encounter with a counselling colleague, who playfully remarked: 'Yes, but coaches are not like us. Coaches drive sports cars, charge phenomenal amounts for their services and wear very smart business suits. We [counsellors] are just ordinary people.' For those of us who are dual-trained practitioners, this comment may stir up a sense of unease. After all, we straddle the categories of 'us' and 'them'.

While it is true that coaching is often conducted in a business environment and fees are generally higher for coaching than for counselling, the term 'ordinary people' does perhaps illuminate a professional cultural tendency to under-state the depth of skills and

expertise needed to work at psychological depth with people in distress. This, of course, is not solely an area of discomfort for those of us who work in the field of counselling. Ask an applied psychologist about their USP and the chances are you will hear a somewhat hesitant response – or worse. SC recently attended a conference where a well-known and highly regarded psychologist was delivering a presentation as part of a symposium. At the start of his presentation, he flashed up a PowerPoint slide that displayed an image of his new book. Having explained to the audience that he was doing so on the instruction of his publisher, he then advised the audience not to buy it as it really wasn't 'that good!' The ripple of laughter emanating from the audience appeared to suggest a degree of empathy with the presenter's evident discomfort about the 'instruction' to promote his own work.

It would seem that, for a number of dual-trained practitioners, there is considerable unease about, or even aversion to, any form of self-promotion, as well as an under-developed ability to recognise, name, communicate and appropriately 'market' our expertise. We do not, it seems, relish opportunities to 'showcase' our expertise. Why might this be?

There are perhaps a number of reasons why self-promotion does not sit easily with dual-trained practitioners. At least some of these may relate to the values instilled in us from our core professional trainings, including:

- that our professional contribution is grounded in the notion of service rather than brand
- an ethical code that strongly emphasises the need to respect the limits of our competence in the services we provide to the public (which can render the notion of self-promotion a distinctly uncomfortable prospect)
- professional frameworks that have at their core the concept of the reflective practitioner who possesses self-awareness of both personal strengths and limits and uses this self-awareness to make informed choices about their own learning and development needs
- the fact that expertise becomes internalised over time and, therefore, less easy to recognise, let alone articulate. (This relates to

the idea of 'unconscious competence' in the oft-cited stages of competence, whereby the practitioner has attained a level of skill that becomes automatic and, therefore, performed with ease.)

These values are laudable and, we would argue, remain critical to ethical and effective professional practice. However our professional trainings may not equip us with the necessary skills and competence for self-promotion. In our experience, training courses in core professions such as counselling and applied psychology have not traditionally considered self-promotion as part of their curriculum. One consequence of this is that any form of personal marketing – including the identification of our USPs – can be regarded as a form of 'selling' that does not sit comfortably with our values. However, this outlook places dual practitioners at a significant disadvantage in today's coaching market where the ability to promote ourselves and what we do, to identify our individual USPs, is a critically important professional skill. Operating in a knowledge-driven labour market, we need to be clear where the added value lies if we employ the services of a dual-trained practitioner as opposed to any other coaching professional.

In the current context, coaching is an unregulated and emerging profession. There is no definition of a 'coach' and anyone can claim the title and practise as such, although most coaches are likely to belong to a professional body such as BACP, whose register is accredited by the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care. The structures to which we might attach our training, experience and credibility in order to demonstrate our value are not yet fully articulated. As a result, we need to lead the way – individually and collectively – in describing the particular contribution and offer of dual-trained practitioners in the marketplace. Related to this is the increased confidence in coaching that can be gained from promoting greater public understanding about the profession as a whole. Clients benefit from coaches' ability to communicate clearly about their USPs as it informs them about the scope of a particular coach's expertise. This in turn can support decision-making about which coaching

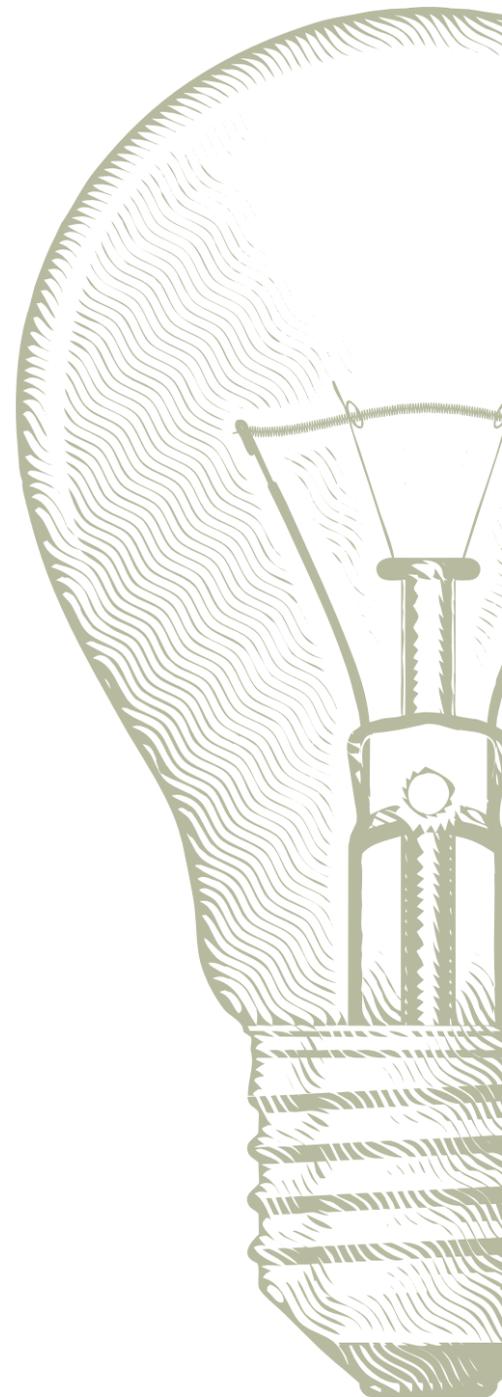
services need to be commissioned. Collectively, having a coherent strategy for communicating our professional identity and contribution to the public will enable the coaching professions to grow in ways that are consistent with our broader, underlying values, as well as the evidence base.

2 The features of dual-trained practitioners

Here we consider some of the elements we might draw from our training and experience to create a distinctive offer in the marketplace. We invite you to think of your own journey, see where your experience is similar or different, and add your own unique elements to the list to develop your own USP.

Drawing on psychological training and experience

- 1 An ability to draw on tried and tested psychological theory, methodology and interventions in order to enable the process of understanding and healing at a sophisticated level.
- 2 An ability to work at psychological depth, competent in holding and working with emotions.
- 3 Theoretically informed understanding of the different manifestations of distress.
- 4 An ability to differentiate who might need coaching and who might need therapy, drawn from experience of assessing clients and developing 'formulations' of their needs.³
- 5 Mature and ethically-informed decision making – drawing on a long professional history of exploring the ethical landscape, an in-depth consciousness about boundaries, and a support structure through which to explore ethical decision making.
- 6 Commitment to personal and professional development. This includes supervision as an expression of a well-embedded professional commitment to looking at the self and to the inner exploration that constantly expands the work that we do.
- 7 Our history and tradition – an established knowledge base, currently unavailable to coaching because it is such a 'new' profession.



Drawing on our coaching training and experience

- 1 Emerging evidence-based interventions to assist clients in maintaining focus, identifying and embedding learning, challenging and changing limiting patterns.
- 2 The ability to hold a focus on potential, choice, aspiration, hopefulness and forward movement.
- 3 A set of models to engage another in planning and taking action.
- 4 The emerging evidence in neuroscience enhancing our understanding of human relationships and the biological influences on human behaviour.
- 5 A commitment to continuous professional development through engaging in peer coaching.
- 6 A focus on building businesses.
- 7 An ability to foster learning skills fit for the future, with a focus less on remembering knowledge and more on developing the ability to foster awareness, think more creatively and work more collaboratively.
- 8 A new lens through which to explore existing structures – for example, an exploration into options and choices for professional supervision, what can be taken from the past (and from the psychological professions) and what new ways can be explored.

3 MAPping the way forward

So what steps can you take to become more comfortable about, and effective in, identifying and communicating your particular 'brand' of coaching?

If the idea of self-promotion seems somewhat alien, if not downright unappealing, it may be helpful to consider how you would work with a client who wanted to find an effective, ethically grounded approach to marketing their services.

A coaching model that can be highly effective in helping clients identify and feel more comfortable about communicating their 'brand' is MAP.⁴ This is a coaching model that combines the original work by the Professional Development Foundation with positive psychology and career theory to help clients establish their priorities and identify areas of strength and contribution.

MAP can be effective for clarifying your personal brand and USPs in a way that is consistent with the values that underpin our core professions.

MAP is an acronym that stands for:

- **Mission** – the vision you have for your career, what you are aiming for and why it matters to you. Questions that can help you clarify your Mission include: What purpose does your career serve in the broader context of your life goals? What values do you bring to your work? What was the journey that has led you to become a dual-trained practitioner? What do you most want to contribute through your engagement with those who seek your services?
- **Attitude** – the attitudes, assumptions and beliefs that you bring to your career and career planning, as well as your ideas about what it takes to succeed. For example, do you see your career as central to your sense of identity, or as secondary to other commitments (such as family)? What are your beliefs about what is possible for you and what it takes to succeed? What are your beliefs about how coaching can facilitate transformation? What are your beliefs about the added value of your dual training to your clients?
- **Process** – once you are clear about your Mission and Attitude then it becomes much easier to design a Process to help you move forward. Process refers to the methods and tools you need to get from where you are now to where you want to be.

For the purposes of clarifying your USP, here are a few possibilities you might want to consider once you are clear about the Mission that underpins your work and the Attitude that supports it.

- 1 Keep a version of your CV that is for your eyes only and that you update regularly. Unlike the more 'official' document you might send to a prospective employer, this CV needs to be a much more detailed document that helps you keep track of the entire range of projects,

services, qualifications and contributions comprising your career. The longer we practise, the more we tend to overlook and take for granted those areas of skill, competence and strength that buyers of coaching want to know about. Your CV will help you capture these achievements as your career progresses.

- 2 Using your emerging CV as a guide, identify the projects and tasks that have given you the greatest sense of achievement and satisfaction. What is it about them that made them feel so satisfying? See if you can identify themes and consider what they might tell you about your USP. Equally, when outcomes are not as you had hoped, see what you can learn from analysing them. What do they tell you about the types of client with whom you are perhaps not best placed to work?
- 3 Related to this, we recommend that you conduct a regular audit of your strengths and limits to ensure that you have up-to-date information about your needs for continuing professional development (CPD). This is consistent with the values of our professions and enables you to have greater faith in your USP, because you know it is grounded in a broader analysis of your strengths and needs.
- 4 Ensure that you have regular CPD sessions with a trusted ally (possibly a coach!) who can review your CV with you and help you identify areas of strength and development that will support you in clarifying your USP.
- 5 Develop a systematic way of recording client feedback, especially where outcomes have been particularly favourable. What do your clients seem to really appreciate about your contribution? The longer you practise, the more likely it is that your client feedback will reflect themes that evidence your unique 'brand' of coaching.

A final thought

Unprecedented times pose many challenges, but they also harbour opportunities. Amid the many challenges of living and working in a climate of austerity, a new professional landscape is emerging – one that is forcing us to think about our professional contributions in different and more creative ways. This

landscape calls for a new kind of professional – one who can combine professional expertise with business acumen and self-knowledge with self-promotion.

We see the quest for identifying, honing and communicating about our individual USPs as not only consistent with the values and ethical codes of our professions but also part of our professional duty to our clients. We benefit no one – least of all our clients – when we shy away from the task of self-promotion; arguably, it is a professional duty in the current healthcare marketplace to be able to communicate about our services accurately and effectively, neither over- nor under-estimating our claims to effectiveness. If we are to ensure that coaching fulfils its potential as a means of transforming lives, we need to consider how best to equip ourselves – individually and collectively – for a future that is not directly in our control.

As the scientist Steven Rose reminds us, '... individually and collectively we have the ability to construct our own futures, albeit in circumstances not of our own choosing'.⁵ Having a clear strategy for identifying, celebrating and communicating our unique brand of coaching will put us in a strong position to make informed choices in uncertain times. When we work with others in a coaching space, we create the possibility of increased potential, greater choice, new thinking and learning, and for growth and greatness, whatever that means to those with whom we work. Our journey may be to hold this for ourselves – to stand fully in our greatness: no more, no less, the authentic place of our unique knowing and being.

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