



EXPERT INTERVIEW



Dr. Brittany Ernst • University of North Carolina at Charlotte • Class of 2020

Q: What would you want to say to graduate students looking to market themselves (and their research) to prospective employers in this new virtual world?

A: First, acknowledge that marketing yourself online is unique. It is essential to take the extra step to *translate* your research and work to an online-friendly format. For example, it would be very easy to copy and paste your research paper's abstract to the web. However, the real work (and the more effective approach) is taking your extensive research and translating it into a simpler, easy-to-read format that other people will be able to consume in a few minutes. This process includes removing any jargon, technical language, and extra fluff. It may also include adding a sentence or two to clearly highlight the value and/or primary contribution of your work. (My advisor has referred to this as the "So what, who cares?")

Once you have done this step of translating your work, I would suggest sharing it in a social media post, writing a brief article to summarize it, or even creating a video to explain your work. Visuals are powerful, so think about how you can use pictures, diagrams, or illustrations to tell the story. In general, this approach to marketing yourself and your research has benefits that are twofold:

- One, potential employers can easily read about your research to get a sense of your experience and expertise.
- Two, you can demonstrate that you have the skill set to digest large amounts of complex information and translate it into something that is useful for others, a very valuable skill in the workforce.

Q: What actionable steps can graduate students take to have better virtual interactions?

A: While virtual interactions may come naturally to some, it's important to keep in mind that we can all take extra steps to improve the quality of our communication regardless of skill level. This will lead to higher quality

interactions and more productive conversations for all parties. Below are a few easy-to-implement tips that are backed in psychological and communication theory:

- **Be present in the meeting.** Focus on the agenda at hand and devote all your attention to the current conversation. You (hopefully) wouldn't check emails and text messages during an in-person meeting with your team, so don't do it in a virtual meeting!
- **Enhance your social presence** with visual and auditory cues. This means enabling your video during meetings when appropriate. In larger meetings, use features like the chat box, hand-raising, and sending reactions such as the "thumbs-up" to indicate that you're actively listening. Research has suggested that higher social presence (more visual and auditory cues) leads to more successful interactions, so make sure to send those cues loud and clear.
- **Enhance others' social presence** by acknowledging that you can see and hear your colleagues. Creating a mutual sense of social presence is a two-way street. We need to not only show that we are present, but we must also acknowledge that others are present, too. Respond (verbally, or in writing) when others make a point or pose a question. Share feedback, ask direct questions, and make sure everyone has the opportunity to have a voice.
- **Match the complexity** of your task to the communication medium. If it's a quick question or clarification, an email or instant message is perfectly acceptable. When working on a more complex task or project, you might normally walk over to your colleague's desk to discuss the issue in person. If this is the case, schedule a phone or video call to work out the details. One brief phone call could save dozens of emails back-and-forth to reach the same conclusion. Matching the communication medium to the task at hand will save time and improve productivity.



INTERVIEW

continued



Q: What social media platform gives you the most “bang for your buck” in terms of building an online presence?

A: I believe LinkedIn is the most powerful professional social media platform when it is used properly. Your LinkedIn profile sends signals about you. An outdated, incomplete profile may signal to potential employers that you're disorganized or careless in your work. On the other hand, a polished, up-to-date profile can signal that you are conscientious and engaged in your field. For that reason, it's critical to keep an updated profile that aligns with your resume or CV; they should complement one another. I would also recommend spending time developing and revising your LinkedIn headline and bio, as these are the first things people see (and may be the only portion of your profile they actually read). To craft an effective bio, think about how you would introduce yourself to a potential employer in 1-2 sentences. I would not recommend framing your description around your qualifications or achievements, but instead, focus on the value that you can bring.

Q: What is the best way to navigate working or interacting with people who aren't as tech savvy or comfortable in virtual environments?

A: First, we have to recognize that this is a stressful and unprecedented time; virtual work may be brand new to some colleagues, and it will take time for all of us to adjust. Have patience and accept that this is a new normal, at least temporarily. The good news is most of our technology and virtual communication tools are built to be user-friendly and easy to operate once you understand the basics. So, if a colleague is having technical issues, I would recommend first taking a few minutes to clarify and try to help resolve the problem so that it isn't a recurring obstacle. Sometimes, a 30-second explanation of a simple feature or setting can have a massive positive effect on someone's ability to work effectively.

Another key point about virtual meetings and presentations (and I can't stress this enough!) is to **keep it simple**. If you are tech savvy, you may be tempted to show off your skills, using fancy animations

and advanced features in the software we have available to us. Unfortunately, this is not effective or impressive if your audience is bogged down in the technical features or can't follow what's happening on the screen.

I learned this lesson when I was working as an intern a couple of years ago. I felt very confident in my skills and expertise in Microsoft Excel. I was asked to analyze some data for senior leadership, and I eagerly created a dashboard with all the bells and whistles to showcase my findings. The dashboard was complex; it summarized the data of hundreds of employees, highlighted patterns with color-coded themes, and was sortable on 10 different dimensions. On the surface, it seemed like a great tool. However, I was the only person who knew how it worked behind the scenes. The custom formulas and formatting were part of a system that I created, and I was the only one who could make edits if anything needed to be changed. After presenting my work to our function's leader, I realized the dashboard would be totally useless to anyone else once I finished my internship and moved on.

I realized that **more complexity is not always better**. I created a new dashboard from scratch, with the end users in mind. It had similar reporting features but was much simpler to use. Anyone could access the report and filter the data they needed. In sum, just because you know how to use advanced technological features doesn't mean you should. In this case, *simplicity* demonstrates mastery, and your colleagues will be grateful!

MEET THE EXPERT

Dr. Brittany Ernst received her MA and PhD in IO Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her MA thesis focused on how people perceive and interact with online groups. Findings suggested that virtual boundaries (i.e., how easy it is to join and leave a group) and social presence (i.e., whether we feel "seen" online) are important for successful online group interactions. Her dissertation examined the power of charismatic leadership in novel contexts, including virtual interactions.