

Ten (Eleven) Things Evolutionists Can Do to Improve Communication

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1) **Quality Control:** So much of the mass communication of evolution is dull and uninspiring. For example, the AIBS-sponsored video *Evolution: Why Bother?* is tragically bad — nothing but talking heads and still images. Any introductory film student could have explained to them that in film and video the primary communication takes place through the *images* presented. When all we show are faces talking, we communicate virtually nothing. We need the simple, honest feedback gained by showing these productions to our neighbors and watching them fall asleep. Just send the sponsors a note that this is not good enough. Raise the bar. It's that simple. When evolution media looks bad, evolutionists look bad. Cost to you of this suggestion: \$0.

2) **Attitude:** *Never* “rise above” one of the simple principles we learned in acting class. Whenever we condescend, we lose the sympathy of our audience. When evolutionists call ID proponents “idiots”, it just makes the audience side with the people being ridiculed. It is a simple principle of mass communication. Even though Stephen Jay Gould was my hero in graduate school nearly 30 years ago, my students at USC find his style and voice to be arrogant, elitist, condescending, verbose ... the list goes on. Cost to you of this suggestion: \$0.

3) **Concision:** It is a by-product of the information era. Get used to it. In fact, practice it. The most effective means of communication is through storytelling. The shorter, more concise, and punchier the story, the more engaged and interested the audience. Scientists need to maintain accuracy and precision, but shorter, punchier stories will not hurt anything. Observe Hollywood and advertising pitchmen: they are able to tell entire stories in very few words. Cost to you of this suggestion: \$0.

4) **Modernization:** A recent CNN poll showed that 44% of Americans get their information on science and technology through television — more than through any other medium. So why isn't the world of science communication geared towards this, even just a little bit? There are now dozens of science *writing* programs around the country; why no science *electronic media* programs? Cost to you of this suggestion: \$0.

5) **Setting Priorities:** Effective communication costs money — real, cold, hard dollars. Scientists sit through technical talks with bad visuals and poor sound, and seem to accept it as standard practice. On a wider scale, this is mirrored in the tiny allocation for science communication in research grants (occasionally a few dollars are allocated for outreach). Compare this with businesses making products and spending perhaps half of their budgets on marketing and advertising. *Everyone* needs to accept that we live in an information-glutted world, and if we do not pay sufficient attention to communicating effectively what we have to say, then we will be unheard. It is a matter of priorities. Cost to you of allocating more funds to communication: as much as you can afford, but it is time to make it hurt a little, to make up for the lack of priority on communication in the past.

6) **Understanding:** Intellectuals are handicapped as mass communicators. I had this line in my film, and took it out because it sounded too insulting, but it's true. Mass audi-

ences do not follow people who *think*, they follow people who *act*. Try taking an acting class and you'll get to know about this intimately. Cost to you of this suggestion: \$0.

7) **Risk Taking/Innovation:** Every stock investor knows you allocate at least 10% of your stock portfolio to high-risk ventures. There are no signs that formal investment in high-risk innovation of science communication has been taking place. You need to ask your science agencies what percentage of their funding is going to high-risk, wild ideas for mass communication. They may sound irresponsible, but without these ideas, you end up with homogenization. Come on, folks, we're talking about basic out-breeding dynamics here. Cost to you of this suggestion: \$0.

8) **Humor:** This is yet another by-product of the information era. It is no coincidence that news anchors, who were stoically serious 30 years ago, today tell jokes and tease each other, or that *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central is the most popular form of news for kids (as well as a lot of adults); or that Michael Moore, Al Franken, and Bill Maher have become such popular news critics. Humor has become a major channel of communication. So lighten up, evolutionists. Cost to you of this suggestion: \$0.

9) **Unscripted Media and the Mass Audience:** This goes with modernization. The mass audience has changed drastically in just the past decade. About half of the acting jobs available a decade ago in Hollywood have been lost to reality television — which is unscripted entertainment. The mass audience is bored and desperate for anything unpredictable. This is why, at our Yale University screening of *Flock of Dodos*, when evolutionist Richard Prum, in a moment of brilliance, yanked the microphone away from me as I droned on about the need for spontaneity, the audience erupted more than at any other moment in the entire evening. Cost to you of this suggestion: \$0.

10) **Sincerity:** Even though Prum was a bit ungainly after grabbing the microphone, the audience didn't care. The gesture was so sincere, came from such a visceral level, showed such passion, such risk-taking, so much desire to act (rather than just pontificate as I was doing), that he stole their hearts. There is a great deal to be learned from that. Cost to you of this suggestion: \$0.

11) **Casting:** All advocates are *not* created equal when it comes to communicating with the public. Suffice it to say: even if you have a Nobel prize and even if you give really *great* lectures, you *still* might not be the best person on camera. One bad twitch will set back your cause despite all your knowledge and advanced degrees. But ... pick the *right* person even if this is only the chair of a state curriculum writing committee— in my movie this was Steve Case, who is the most popular and instantly likable scientist I've ever seen on film — and the impact can be far greater than what you get using any Nobel laureate. And by the way, there's only one group of people who can decide for certain if your spokesperson is effective: your *audience*. Theirs is the only opinion that matters. Cost to you of this suggestion: potentially bruised egos and \$0.

Value of better public understanding of science: priceless.