

Metaphor of the Month

All well-planned communications begin with consideration of the intended audience. If you broadcast your message without first evaluating *how the audience will view it*, you run a considerable risk of having it disregarded, misunderstood, or just plain ignored. Ambulance drivers clearly understand and apply this fundamental principle:

There may be times when you will be tempted to sidestep this principle. Someone on your team will come up with a clever turn of phrase, amazing statistic, or arresting image that has everyone in your office buzzing. So be prepared. Cut out this picture and put it near your desk. When all that excitement starts to build, the image will prompt you to stop and ask: will the people we need to reach *really* see it the same way we do?

Perhaps the ambulance will come to your rescue, too. ■



See You in Pittsburgh?

If you will be at the Council on Foundations' annual conference in Pittsburgh, please consider attending my session on Tuesday, May 9th, from 10-11:30a. I'll be talking about "Storytelling as Best Practice" and handing out free copies of my newest book, *Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes*. Hope to see you there!

Free-range thinking™ is a monthly newsletter for public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses that want to reach more people more effectively. For a free subscription, send your request to: andy@agoodmanonline.com or call 323.464.3956. Back issues are available on the web at www.agoodmanonline.com.

Newsletter edited by Lori Matsumoto.



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GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

444 north larchmont blvd, suite 102
los angeles, ca 90004

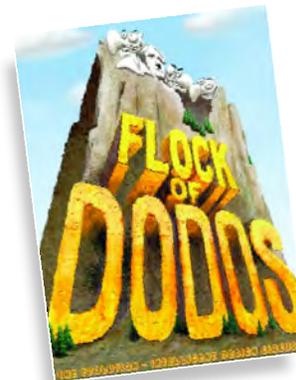


If Our Science Is Sound, Why Don't They Hear Us?

That's what evolutionists keep wondering as more and more Americans seriously consider intelligent design. Randy Olson has an answer for them, but it's one they may not want to hear.

Ever since Charles Darwin published his theory of evolution in 1859, evidence has steadily mounted in support. Even for those who pay only occasional attention to the science, there is no controversy: genetic mutation and natural selection, processes that connect us to the earliest forms of life, are indisputably visible in fossil records spanning millions of years.

So when the Pew Forum polled Americans in 2005, why did 60% say they believed in either the Bible's account of creation or in a God who guided the process? And why are advocates of evolution continuing to lose hearts and minds to intelligent design today?



Randy Olson's entertaining new documentary, *Flock of Dodos: The Evolution-Intelligent Design Circus*, delivers the answer. By assuming this battle is for minds alone, evolutionists are ignoring (and often trampling on) the hearts of the people they hope to convince. And this opens the door for intelligent design's spokespeople who ask, reasonably and respectfully, why not consider all views?

The ongoing debate is a useful reminder that having the truth on your side is only half the battle. How you tell it is the other half, and Olson has some excellent advice that can help scientists in any field do a better job.

▶ With a PhD in biology from Harvard and an MFA in cinema from USC, Randy Olson is uniquely qualified to make a film that takes scientists to task for poor communication. That he chose to focus on the evolution-intelligent design (ID) debate seems inevitable. Olson was raised in Kansas—ground zero for this battle—and his mother lives just around the corner from John Calvert, one of ID's most prominent proponents.

In July 2005, Olson put \$35,000 on his credit card, picked up a camera and began filming in Kansas. Over the next three months he conducted interviews at Harvard, Yale, and other hallowed halls of science along the East Coast before attending an intelligent design conference in South Carolina. By October, Olson had wrapped production in Los Angeles, where he currently lives and works, and was ready to screen *Flock of Dodos* for the first time.

The movie's title does double duty. Taken literally, it refers to the odd-looking, flightless bird that became extinct in the 17th century because it could not adapt to changes in its environment. The disappearance of dodos was natural selection at work—a solid vote for evolution, in other words. But after you watch scientists in Olson's film defending evolution with language that only a PhD could understand and an arrogance that would make even the thick-skinned cringe, you realize to whom the title is actually referring.

Flock of Dodos had its world premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York on April 30th, and Olson hopes to announce plans for nationwide distribution very soon. In the meantime, he has posted

advice on the web to help evolutionists (and scientists in all fields) advocate more effectively before their cherished beliefs go the way of the dodo. (To read the complete text of Olson's "Ten Things Evolutionists Can Do to Improve Communication," visit http://loom.corante.com/archives/2006/02/17/randy_flock_of_dodos_olson_speaks.php.) All ten tips are worth considering, but due to space limitations I offer summaries and excerpts from five below:

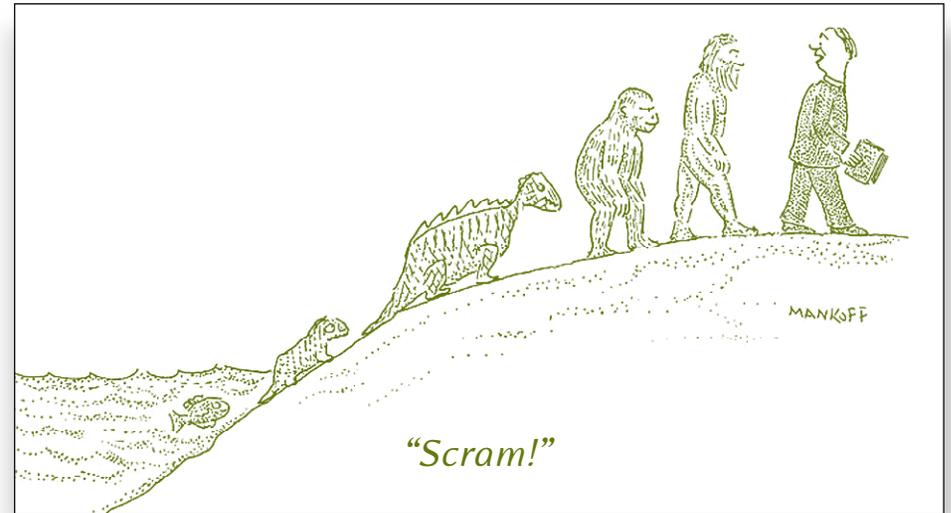
Never rise above. Nobody likes to be condescended to, and proponents of intelligent design observe this principle religiously (so to speak.) Their approach is distinctly soft-sell, asking audiences to simply "consider all views" and "let other voices be heard." Evolutionists, on the other hand, are masters of condescension. In *Flock of Dodos*, one scientist tells his colleagues, "When people start saying things that are manifestly ignorant, I think [we] have to stand up and say, 'You're an idiot.'" Now there's a winning argument.

Be concise. "The shorter, more concise, and punchier the story you can tell," says Olson, "the greater the interest you will hold with an audience." Intelligent design advocates have a three-word tagline: "Teach the controversy." In his film, Olson asks a scientist if the evolutionists have a tagline of their own. They don't, probably because nobody wants to be accused of oversimplifying or "dumbing down" the message. Unfortunately, that leaves the scientists droning on and on, distinctly reminiscent of a certain Democratic Presidential candidate.

Lighten up. "It's no coincidence that news anchors, who were stoically serious 30 years ago, today tell jokes and tease each other,"

says Olson. When you consider the success of Michael Moore and Al Franken, as well as the growing audience for Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*, you have to recognize that humor is a wide and easily accessible channel of communication. In *Flock of Dodos*, ID advocates such as John Calvert come across as friendly, funny folks you wouldn't mind hanging around and having a beer with. And the evolutionists? Check, please.

Prioritize communications. Which means putting serious dollars behind the message you want to disseminate. "The 9/11 Commission was the first government study to accept the need to allocate equal resources to its communication to make a difference," says Olson. "If you don't pay sufficient attention to the communication of what you have to say, what you have to say will go unheard."



Modernize. "We are a television society," says Olson, who cites a CNN poll showing that 44% of Americans get their science news from TV. While there are dozens of science writing programs at colleges around the country, Olson was aware of only one program (a natural history filmmaking course at Montana State University) that taught science students how to tell their story in images. The choice is ours: wring our hands over the decline in reading or improve our ability to communicate in the audience's medium of choice.

"The bigger issue...is who will be the voice not just of evolution, but of science in general," said Olson in an interview on *LiveScience.com*. "Is it going to be the scientists who are handicapped by their blind obsession with the truth? Or will it be the public relations firms that know the importance of a good story but feel no constraints by the truth?" Darwin tells us only the fittest will survive. But that's only a theory, right? ■