

ADAM GREENFIELD

Welcome to The Great Communicators Podcast presented by The MIT Office of Graduate Education, a professional development podcast expressly designed to bring lessons from the field to our graduate student researchers.

My name is Adam Greenfield and as communicators, sometimes it's easy to fall into the trap of self-doubt. You begin to question not only if what you're presenting is accurate or clear or even engaging, but also if, simply put, you're the right person to do the job.

But in this episode, we're going to hear how to avoid that trap of uncertainty and insecurity, how there's no better communicator than you to communicate your research and work, and also why a list of ingredients or information is better off with a little flair than without.

Our guest in this episode has spent well over a decade as a journalist and editor, and communicates in all mediums, from television to radio to podcasts to print. Still, even with all that experience...

SCOTT LEWIS

You're never going to feel perfect and perfectly confident that you are in the perfect position to tell a story, but you do anyway.

ADAM GREENFIELD

That's Scott Lewis, the CEO and editor-in-chief of Voice of San Diego...

SCOTT LEWIS

... an online- mostly online news investigative service for San Diego. And I'm a journalist.

ADAM GREENFIELD

Scott is a great guest because of those credentials. But it becomes next-level when it comes to the role communication plays in his everyday personal and professional life; it's pretty much everything to him.

SCOTT LEWIS

I mean, it's my essence, really. It's like the thing that I mostly think about in life.

ADAM GREENFIELD

When it comes to Scott's style of writing, there's an obvious sense of audience engagement, which as we've heard a lot of in this series is a big piece of communication. There's word choice and narrative and you come away feeling as if you have either the facts you need or at least all the facts that are currently available. This skill is learnable and as we'll see, this skill can be, and probably should be, applied to a large portion of scientific writing.

This may be cart before the horse stuff, though. For most of your educational career, the type of scientific writing you've probably encountered is, again, pretty rigid and formulaic. Trying to inject an engaging story could prove to be pretty difficult and imposing. But maybe all you need is a little well-placed confidence.

SCOTT LEWIS

I think that confidence is not about knowing you're good. It's not about knowing you're valuable. It's about going through it even when you don't. Do you know what I mean? It's like you're still pushing, you're still going to write it, even though you don't have the data that proves that you're valuable or attractive or that your insight is going to work. When I think of confidence- when you public speak, for example, I found that you're never going to not be nervous about it. Maybe Bill Clinton's not nervous about it. But most people, I think, when they get in front of a crowd are going to get nervous about it. The difference is that some of them keep going and others let it, like, really, you know, paralyze them. And it's the same thing with writing.

ADAM GREENFIELD

And communicating something to someone shouldn't just be a laundry list of facts. Scott used the recent political season to illustrate this point, that it's important for the audience to leave your talk or finish reading your written communication and know what your universe looks like instead of only hearing or reading numbers or stats with no relatable context or background.

SCOTT LEWIS

I think you can look at the political campaigns we saw in 2016, that there's three major candidates: Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, and Hillary Clinton. Obviously there's a bunch more but let's just take those three. I think that Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, when they spoke, helped people understand their world in a way that they could fathom and replicate and they could leave there with messages. You know, those clear messages. I think when you left a Hillary Clinton speech, though, I don't think- I think that the problems she laid out, she didn't explain them as much as she just emphasized how big and gnarly they were. And it was probably a more accurate view of the world than either of them. But it's so overwhelming and scary when you leave those, you could only make incremental progress on these big, gigantic, overwhelming problems.

ADAM GREENFIELD

I know Scott's pointing to public speaking but whether you're giving a talk or writing an article or paper or even grant proposals, providing an emotional connection to your research will make communicating it that much more effective. The last thing you want is to come off sounding monotone in your writing or speaking.

SCOTT LEWIS

Well, and more than that, I think it's a recitation of facts and ideas, which as sentences are- could be well written and wonderful sentences. But they were just constant recitations. And whenever you find yourself listing things I think you're losing. When you find yourself explaining something, then you're winning.

ADAM GREENFIELD

But there's still this thought that is stuck to the side of my brain, right or wrong, this idea that those that are in fields that are driven by hard data and solid fact are, perhaps, less inclined to be a creative storyteller. So then what? If that really is the case, what do researchers and scientists need to keep in mind if storytelling is not their forte but they want to engage their audience, written or otherwise?

SCOTT LEWIS

I think facts ostensibly, if you're in this sphere, are what are guiding your passion. And so when you can identify the string of facts that make you feel the way you do, and then try to communicate that to people who are listening to you, I think you've struck the chord, you've hit what you want to hit. But when you find yourself just reciting things and not entirely knowing where that fits within their emotional storytelling, then you're lost, you're drifting. You know, I think that in any situation, an election or a church or a- if you're sitting there just rambling through facts that you might find interesting in some deep part of your soul but you don't actually communicate why they're interesting, you've lost.

ADAM GREENFIELD

No one is saying communicating to an audience is easy. It can be a pretty humbling experience. But with a little perseverance and inner strength, pushing through the anxiety will be more beneficial than not. That doesn't mean to fake it until you make it but if you're struggling to find confidence as a communicator, keep in mind the passion you have for the subject and use that to your communicative advantage.

And as Scott points out, having an engaging story to tell besides just a recitation of facts is important. While you may find those facts interesting, and surely they are on some level, you have to make sure the way you communicate them makes them interesting to your audience, too.

There's an old adage when it comes to writing which aptly describes this: Show, not tell.

Thanks for listening to The Great Communicators Podcast brought to you by The MIT Office of Graduate Education. My name is Adam Greenfield, and feel free to talk amongst yourselves.

MUSIC & SOUNDS

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