

COMMUNICATING SCIENCE

Would You Like People to Listen to You? Be More Likable!

by Sara K. McBride

I blurted out the above statement during a lightning talk recently at the Northern California Earthquake Hazards Workshop. I was presenting social science research conducted in Christchurch, New Zealand, during the Canterbury earthquake sequence, specifically regarding earthquake forecasts and their communication. My statement was met with bouts of laughter and a few claps. Reflecting back, I regret being so blunt with my colleagues, but here is what the social science research suggests: Likeability and relatability are key factors in whether people listen to you or not.

Relationships and relatability are essential parts of good communication; their importance tends to be undervalued in communicating science. Often we get so focused on our messages that we overlook the relationship we have with our many diverse publics (or audiences, if you prefer). [Jacobson \(2003\)](#) found that focusing solely on our messages rather than the audience means that messages are doomed (at best) to be irrelevant or (at worst) counterproductive. [Brehm and Brehm \(2013\)](#) argue that counterproductive effects include a push-back attitude against authority that results in reluctance to change. It is easy to understand; we can control our messages, but our likeability or relatability can include factors we simply cannot change because people have a wide variety of prejudices and biases toward gender, ethnicity, facial features, age, etc. But there are things that we can control, based on research, in terms of communicating when it comes to our likeability.

Research suggests certain factors favor likeability and relatability. I have developed the following list of ways to consider likeability in the context of communicating your science, but it is by no means exhaustive. Consider this a starter discussion on attributes of likability and relatability. Here is my list of ways to be more likable when engaging your audience about science.

1. Show respect for the people you are talking with.

Remember that not everyone is a seismologist. We are actually a small community. You may very well be the only seismologist that some people will ever interact with. So, good manners and likeability are important; you may be the sole representative of your entire discipline.

2. Consider your presentations as a two-way (or more) conversation.

Think of communicating as more than a broadcast; you are having a discussion with engaged participants. Co-created and participatory communication is

increasing in popularity as we enter the age of mass self-communication. People are communicating about themselves on a mass scale, thanks largely to social media. After a talk, be available for one-on-one conversations or be willing to reply to comments and questions on social media.

- 3. Use words that can be understood by everyone.** Because everyone is not a seismologist, talking to people using the special language and jargon of our discipline is not advisable. You are not talking to other scientists; you are speaking to people who are outside our science community, so limit jargon and gobbledegook. [Helmreich et al. \(2005\)](#) found that jargon exists as a way to exclude or confuse, or to share a connection or “talk shop.” We need to stop using this kind of language because it sets us apart from the people who do not speak it. More than 70 years ago, [Flesch \(1945\)](#) argued that gobbledegook did not make a writer or speaker seem more intelligent to others, it just made the writer or speaker feel more important. You can still use some more complicated words (such as magnitude, fault, etc.), but you need to define them during the talk. Try out your explanations with people outside your field and with diverse backgrounds. You will soon find out if your vocabulary level is right (see [Lamontagne and Goulet, 2018](#), for how to get there).
- 4. People are diverse, intelligent, and interested in technical information, but not for the reasons you may think.** Although most people do not have the in-depth insider knowledge that you do, it does not mean they do not want access to complex ideas or probabilities. [Wein et al. \(2015\)](#) found that a group of people who experienced the Canterbury Earthquake Sequence in New Zealand valued aftershock forecasts, even if they did not understand all of the information. People found the science as a source for comfort.
- 5. Ensure a pathway to understanding for as many types of people as possible.** Back to the [Wein et al. \(2015\)](#) study, people who were in the aftershock area expressed that they liked the different types of ways the forecasts were communicated, including analogy, story, numbers, tables, and maps. Using different methods of communication is helpful and allows more people to access your science.
- 6. In the eyes of the public, credibility does not necessarily come with your title.** [McCrandle and Wolfinger \(2009\)](#) found that, over the past three generations, evi-

dence suggests that authority and expert perspectives are increasingly challenged and viewed with skepticism. Hiding behind our titles as scientists or the brands of our organizations is no longer sufficient. You may be judged on your relatability more than on your diplomas.

7. **Personal stories connect us.** As explored by [Sellnow et al. \(2009\)](#), personal narratives and stories are considered good persuasive practice, in which “science can be seen as complex and access can be difficult to different audiences OR highly technical terms are used making it out of reach for some people” (p. 149). It is okay to share personal connections in the form of narratives or stories with people.
8. **Support other scientists who do outreach activities.** This is a tough one. Science can be a deeply competitive and combative process. Most of us have suffered the scars of painful peer review or lost against colleagues for grants or jobs. It can be all too easy to attack our peers for public communication. However, remember that communication is a process, not a product. It does not end, and it is never finished. From my professional experience working with scientists, many chose not to step up to the media plate because they are unsure about what other scientists will say about them, not because they are scared of the public. But ultimately, we should all have the same goal: to invite everyone in to understand our science. Developing a supportive community, in which we want to include people in our sciences, is vital to achieving that goal.
9. **Be where the people are.** We may not all be social media wizards, but if that is where the conversation is happening, then we need to be there, engaging. Uses and gratifications theory posits that people are drawn to certain media channels (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, broadcast television, and radio) because those channels gratify their needs. [Massey \(1995\)](#) examined uses and gratifications theory in the context of earthquakes and found it to be highly relevant during earthquakes. If we want to engage with people, we need to be fluent in their preferred channels.

Is being likable enough? No, we still need solid messaging combined with protective action advice (e.g., drop, cover, and hold on) for people to take action.

After reflecting on my earlier exchanges with my seismology colleagues after my talk, I realized that the reason I felt badly about talking about likeability with seismologists is that I find you all likable on a personal basis. I would like this characteristic to stand out in your communication. What I suggest here are some ways that may increase the overall relatability and likeability of seismologists, so the rest of the world can like and value you all just as much as I do. ☺

REFERENCES

- Brehm, S. S., and J. W. Brehm (2013). *Psychological Reactance: A Theory of Freedom and Control*, Academic Press, New York, New York.
- Flesch, R. (1945). More about gobbledegook, *Public Adm. Rev.* **5**, no. 3, 240–244.
- Helmreich, S., J. L. Jané, and D. Farwell (2005). Identifying jargon in texts, *Procesamiento del Lenguaje Natural* **35**, no. 2005, 425–432.
- Lamontagne, M., and C. Goulet (2018) Using the media epicenter to talk about the seismological epicenter, *Seismol. Res. Lett.* **89**, no. 1, 210–211, doi: [10.1785/0220170244](https://doi.org/10.1785/0220170244).
- Jacobson, T. L. (2003). Participatory communication for social change: The relevance of the theory of communicative action, *Comm. Yearbook* **27**, no. 1, 87–123.
- Massey, K. B. (1995). Analyzing the uses and gratifications concept of audience activity with a qualitative approach: Media encounters during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake disaster, *J. Broadcast. Electron. Media* **39**, no. 3, 328–349.
- McCrindle, M., and E. Wolfinger (2009). *The ABC of XYZ: Understanding the Global Generations*, University of New South Wales Press Ltd., Sydney, Australia.
- Sellnow, T. L., R. R. Ulmer, M. W. Seeger, and R. S. Littlefield (2009). Ethical considerations in risk communication, in *Effective Risk Communication: A Message-Centered Approach*, Springer Science & Business Media, New York, New York, 147–161.
- Wein, A., S. Potter, S. Johal, E. Doyle, and J. Becker (2015). Communicating with the public during an earthquake sequence: Improving communication of geoscience by coordinating roles, *Seismol. Res. Lett.* **87**, no. 1, 112–118

*Sara K. McBride
U.S. Geological Survey
345 Middlefield Road
Menlo Park, California 94025 U.S.A.
skmcbride@usgs.gov*

Published Online 11 April 2018