

Observations on “Renegade View of What We Do”

Care and Feeding of The Ego

Ouch! Don Wells' shots hit darn close to home.

It worries me that I had to read some of these bloopers about four times before catching the mistakes. Frankly, I kind of like some of those Don winced at. I like clever leads and heads and hate to discourage anyone from writing them. But alas, there is a fine line.

A lot of that strikes me as an ego problem. For example, our sources can be pompous at times. We communicators can be likewise, especially when it comes to accepting criticism.

But I think it's our **lack** of ego or self-esteem that seems to get us into the most trouble. Too often we write what the administrator or scientist or extension specialist tells us to. Or at least we quote them word for word without straightening out the technical jargon or the “Extensionese.”

Alas, I think it's time for a little assertive training for communications people. I said “assertive,” not “aggressive.”

The trick is to remember that **you are the communications expert**. That's what you're getting paid for. Your bosses and sources should expect nothing less than a professional effort. Doing something just to suit them is a mistake too many of us make.

Also, we could use a little more frank honesty. That means saying to a source, “I don't understand your area as well as you do. So explain it to me simply so I can explain simply to those who should know what you are doing.”

I also think there are many cases where we send a boy to do a

man's job. The head editors at universities often throw their junior staff members to the wolves, having them interview some of these great domineering types. I think it's very important • that the head editor have some assertive training, • that he or she handle these wolves themselves or give staff good support, • that she or he have credibility and professional status, and • that he or she constantly remind clientele that "this communications office or department is made up of professionals...experts if you will." After all, you are just as much of a specialist in your field as the dairy specialist is in his, etc. And you wouldn't think of questioning that dairy specialist about his expertise.

Don said another thing—we editors should have someone check our copy. True, an **editor's editor** would be a nice luxury. Unfortunately, for many small staffs, it's a luxury we can't afford. Still, I think it's a good idea to check each other out now and then.

Also, changing jobs now and then is probably a good idea. I would suggest that if you've been in the same job for five years, you're probably getting a little stale. Sabbaticals help. Just doing something a little different in your office or your department might at least give you a refreshing outlook. At least we should encourage publications editors and broadcasters to comment about writers and stories (and vice versa).

Finally, there's the Peter Principle, "promoting people to their highest level of incompetence." I'm for keeping good writers writing and paying them. As we stay on a job too long, we can get out of date and out of tune. But I think a lot of that can be avoided by changing jobs now and then...or teaching. A good teacher can learn a lot from his students. They have a way of keeping us on our toes.

The trick is to stay young, but be mature. Don't have so much ego that you can't accept criticism...but have enough ego to accept yourself as a professional and do a professional job.

—Joseph J. Marks, *Science News Director, University of Missouri-Columbia*