

What Would Happen If We Treated Scientists Like Rock Stars?

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THESE DAYS, IT SEEMS LIKE EVERYBODY KNOWS LADY GAGA, but how many know Noam Chomsky who reshaped the field of psychology? A 2010 Research!America survey revealed that 72% of the public can't name a living scientist. Would it make a difference if we treated scientists like rock stars? Recently, the Geoffrey Beene Foundation and *GQ* magazine set out to find out.

The December 2010 edition of *GQ* carried a six-page spread of rockers and scientists designed to help bridge the gap between science and the public. The Rock Stars of Science Web site (www.rockstarsofscience.org/) honors 28 "Roc Docs" of 2009–2010. One of the featured physicians, Susan J. Blumenthal, M.D., M.P.A., former U.S. Assistant Surgeon General, has this to say about what scientists and rock stars have in common: "Rock stars and scientists share passion, creativity, and the thrill of discovery. Where musicians use their minds, instruments, and voices to create new rhythms, researchers use science and technology to make the music of medicine: new discoveries that improve health and eradicate disease."

A critic of the Rock Stars of Science campaign¹ says that while the goal is connecting science to people and the idea is to see scientists, like rock stars, as "one of us," the premise is flawed. Rock stars are "the other," representing a world of fast cars and glamour that may be aspired to but is seldom achieved.

One Rock Stars of Science campaign goal was to increase funding for scientific research and, for a number of reasons, that goal may be realized. President Obama's FY 2012 budget contains a 6% increase for federal research and development, which is in line with the support this President has shown for basic and applied science throughout his presidency.

Another campaign goal, to inspire young people to pursue scientific careers, may be more elusive. A November 2010 column² reported the reaction of Sofya Low, a public high school math and science teacher: "They're asking kids to go to this website, process that they like Timbaland and then that he's standing with scientists, read that the scientists study Alzheimer's, figure out what that is, and then see how that's

exciting. I just don't see it happening with teenagers and their 20-second attention spans." Her students don't perceive science as glamorous and well-paying, so science needs to be interesting in a fundamental way to attract their attention.

Although some scientists, such as Stephen Hawking, have a knack for making science interesting to the public and generating media interest, many scientists may be uncomfortable in the spotlight. Communicating with the public is now considered a scientist's responsibility. For scientists unaccustomed to speaking before lay audiences, programs such as the Aldo Leopold Leadership Program at Oregon State University exist. They train scientists on how to talk to the media, testify before Congress, and communicate effectively with business leaders.

A recent paper acknowledges that scientists have "a growing recognition that effective communication requires initiatives that sponsor dialogue, trust, relationships, and public participation across a diversity of social settings and media platforms."³ The authors concluded that if people feel they are being marketed to, trust erodes, and recommended that scientists find ways to engage the public that respect "differences in knowledge, values, perspectives, and goals."

References

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