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Scientists must woo the public to get past the awkward “blind date” stage
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Alan Alda wants scientists to nurture solid, two-way communications with the public, the same level of

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communication the scientists would strive for if they were seriously dating the public. Photo: Cayo Espanto Private Island/Wikimedia Commons.

By Leigh Cooper

Steady eye contact. Open body language. Warm, conversational tones. These are phrases not used often enough to describe scientists.

Alan Alda wants to change that. Alda, an award-winning actor best known for his portrayal of Hawkeye Pierce on the T.V. show “M.A.S.H.,” has always been attracted to science. On July 15 Alda spoke at The National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C., about his experiences hosting the PBS “[Scientific American Frontiers](http://www.pbs.org/saf/) (<http://www.pbs.org/saf/>)” T.V. series and his work with the [Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science](http://www.centerforcommunicatingscience.org/) (<http://www.centerforcommunicatingscience.org/>) at Stony Brook University.

“I think that the public is on a blind date with science,” Alda said at the beginning of the talk. “They are uncomfortable. They are not in a familiar situation.”

Blind dates are tense, Alda said. You don’t know if you can trust the person sitting across from you. Your date may even have an agenda. Scientists and the public need to move past the blind date stage and form a committed relationship, Alda said, in a process he breaks down into three steps.

First comes attraction. Attraction is quick, happening within a few seconds or minutes.

Emotion helps the spark of attraction flare. A scientist with inviting body language and a warm tone of voice will attract his or her audience much easier than a scientist in “lecture-mode,” bent on using formal, non-conversational mannerisms, Alda said.

After attraction, infatuation—the second step—can follow, Alda said. Infatuation is the time when all you can think about is your new love. It relies not only on emotion, but also includes memory.

“Memory happens in the presence of emotion,” Alda said. “And it is essential for this infatuation to take place, because we want the [audience] to not just love [science], but remember it.”

To stimulate infatuation, scientists should abandon their jargon and lecturing and simply tell their stories of discovery, tales full of passion and excitement, obstacles and victories, Alda said. If a researcher is warm and engaging, the audience will remember the science.

In the end, scientists and the public need to take the leap and commit to each other—the third step.

“I’ve seen over and over again when two people are committed to each other in a long-term relationship, they’re really listening to one another,” Alda said.

While hosting “Scientific American Frontiers,” Alda did not walk into his interviews with scientists with a set of prepared questions or an agenda. Instead he let his inquisitiveness and sense of wonder drive the conversations and soon the scientists became invested in fulfilling his curiosity and explaining things in a way that Alda, a non-scientist, would understand.

“I personally wanted to learn and that focused them on me,” Alda said. “They stopped worrying about the camera, stopped lecturing and really talked to me in a personal way.”

Through the Alan Alda Center, Alda hopes to help scientists, old and young, connect with the public. The program does not make scientists into actors or comedians. Instead, the center exposes scientists to improvisational theater exercises meant to teach scientists to connect with and relate to their acting partners. While doing improv acting, the players focus on their partner’s body language, vocal tone, and facial expressions to figure out what to say next.

For a scientist giving a talk or interview this translates to carefully noting whether the audience is engaged and following the narrative. If they aren’t, the scientist can adjust how he or she is describing his or her science.

And, with any luck, turn attraction into true love.

– **Leigh Cooper is a science writing intern in AGU’s Public Information department.**

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