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Pro-Vaccine Communication: You're Doing it Wrong

3 min read • original

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A particular drum I like to beat, is about science communicators learning how to use images effectively. Give your blog post illustration some thought. Don't just stick any old candied cherry on the top of your post: make sure it's the *right* maraschino cherry. Then add sprinkles.

If you are having trouble finding good images to go with your post, remember: there are people trained to do this stuff. And there's lots of resources to find them.

And nowhere is this failure greater in the world of #scicomm than in articles that are pro-vaccine.

To get this out of the way: I am a father and I ~~believe~~ understand the efficacy of vaccines is worth the relatively small risk compared to the disease-stricken, life-threatening alternatives. No evidence shows they cause autism. And *all that* is not what this post is about.

This post is about how poor image choice can undo other wise decent science communication.

Time for examples (click each image to return to the source). So what's wrong with these pro-vaccine posts and articles?

(Image by Dreamstime Illustration)

Ah yes. Dr. Headless will stab you now.

I found the next example due to a tweet from @IrfanDhalla, a concerned general internist and assistant professor on Twitter:

This doc gets it.

(Image by Colin McConall, Toronto Star File Photo)

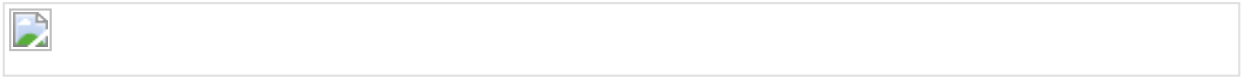
Hurry and vaccinate! Act now! I know some children do scream at needles, but there's a lot you can do to quell their anxiety. Communicators can quell parent anxiety by not focusing on the upset kid, and focusing on the healthy kid. I know, other parents will hate me because our son hasn't cried at his vaccines (he's 2, so anticipation isn't a big issue). So I don't know what it's like, and every kid is different. But is this image helpful?

Okay, so these images above are two examples from mainstream media, specifically the Toronto Star here in my hometown, *Toronto*.

What about the online pros? Sites by pharmacy and medical professionals like Science-Based Medicine, Ben Goldacre's Bad Science and Respectful Insolence don't bother with images at all, possibly shortening their own reach. Just the Vax hardly uses them beyond graphs.

From Double X Science.

More clinically-blue needles for your viewing squeamishness. Note there's not even a sense of scale here to give you an idea of how teeny most actually are. Double X Science blogger Tara Haelle had a visual misstep here, but uses much more effective images in other posts.



Shutterstock on KevinMD.

The incredibly popular site KevinMD, above, uses Shutterstock to great effect - check out this typically-headless, awkwardly-posed photo focusing on the needle and skin in the most uncomfortable way possible.

A couple of years ago at ScienceOnline (#scio09, I believe) I raised this issue and a few people defensively reacted saying things like "it's hard to find open source images of needles". So don't.

Don't bother with pictures of needles. A lot of people are scared of needles.

Microsoft image from DoubleXScience.

Above, here's an example of the typically adept images used by Tara Haelle at DoubleXScience. Note the lack of pointy or screamy things.

The anti-science, anti-vaxx crowd often uses emotional appeals and anecdotes to persuade people that they are right to be angry at needles, big scary pharma and doctors. In the text, it's important that all of the well-written blog posts I've used as examples show facts about vaccines, and clear communication about health and risks. Walls of text are intimidating. Images can help. [Make sure to credit them - though that's a rant from the past and for the future #oneproblematatime].

And if you don't know what to show, find an image-making expert and **ask them**. Surely your well-crafted blog post on the safety and importance of vaccines is worth getting it right: at least, don't undercut your own message.

But whatever you do, gawdammit, stop with the pics of screaming children, and the clinically blue needles. You're freaking out the people you're trying to persuade. That's just bad science communication.

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*Typically on Symbiartic, we ask image-creator/artist permission to post their images, even when we don't need to. For this post, I am claiming fair use, as I am reporting on the images in their context and not swiping them to make a different point. Clicking on each image leads back to the original articles.

**I've edited this post to show some more balance on effective image use from a site I enjoy and admire. The intent here was never to throw bloggers I respect under the bus: it was, to show how even the best science communicators can have a blind spot when it comes to images. Edits made after comment #8 below.

Thanks everyone for comments on all media so far, and to Matt Shipman for the recent discussion that brought this issue up again in my mind with burning energy.
