

What can be done to encourage interest and participation in science?

As superficial as it may sound, scientists need to do a better job of “marketing” themselves to young people. After all, no one decides to become a scientist in their thirties, so we need to target kids. To get on track to be an engineer or scientist means you almost have to start taking Algebra I in eighth grade. For that to happen, the science world needs to influence very young minds – first through seventh graders – to see science as exciting and interesting and worthwhile. In that age group, kids are interested in superheroes and movie stars. Big Science (BS) needs big stars and a science superhero who uses his huge brain to outwit the villains. Some name suggestions might be SuperNeuron or Manny The Mighty Polyglot or Ronny Researcher or The Terrible Theorizer. Perhaps they could “deintelligencize” bad guys with his Reverse Intelligence Ray Gun (RIRG); he rigs them. Or more realistically, maybe *she* uses a spray that fuses a guy’s synaptic gaps into a gooey mess.

I know this sounds silly, but I am serious. We need cartoons and programs for young kids where the smart guy always gets the girl, and where smart girls are not afraid to show that they remember the quadratic formula, *and* they know how to use it with devastating effect. We also need more serious programs aimed at kids showing that the real heroes in our world are the Newtons, Pastuers, Einsteins, and Darwins. After all, what meaningful assistance have Julia Roberts or Ashton Kutcher given us? How does their work affect future generations in any meaningful way? So why are they so famous and rich simply because they are entertaining? And yet, most of the scientists involved in the immensely important Human Genome Project are virtually unknown. Even

somebody like Jimmy “the DNA Kid” Watson or Craig “the Shotgun” Venter, who might be the closest thing to superheroes in that field, are known to adults who are interested in science, but virtually unknown to children ages 5 through 14 (our “target market”).

My “final answer” to your question is that BS needs to hire a slew of publicists and Washington lobbyists and they need to write hit songs about science for famous pop icons. They need to be constantly talking about the real heroes of our modern world, the engineers, researchers, professors and scientists who make this world in fact modern.