HOW TO GET A REPUTATION IN PALEONTOLOGY II:
A BETTER TWELVE-STEP PROGRAM

In my last editorial (Lipps 2002), I sug-
gested a 12-step (actually 13) program on
how to get a reputation in paleontology.
Those recommendations brought much
jocosity, many comments and more than a
few stories of how others themselves had
been on the receiving end of one or more
of those 13 steps. They sent me personal
e-mails telling me their tales, but no one
sent them to the Palaeontologica Elec-
tronica discussion section. Of course not,
for the paleontologists who had made their
reputations in that way are still alive, still
active and still in positions of influence. So
I won’t divulge what my e-mailers wrote,
but many were quite funny even when bit-
terly written. Some of those stories went
back decades! I think I can safely say that
the writers will never forget the transgres-
sions against them, and the reputations
(as in my previous editorial) of the perpe-
trators remain secure.

So now I would like to suggest a better
12-step program to get a reputation in
paleontology.

For many of us, these observations
are too late; we already have a reputation
for better or for worse. Maybe you won’t
want to read on, but for teachers and for
those who are newly entering the field—
students, postdocs, and amateurs, I hope
you will find these observations and sug-
gestions, although not comprehensive, to
be useful, enlightening or at least a
reminder.

1. Write great papers. Be creative—
think of really new ideas and test them
properly. Be thorough. Write well. Do
not obfuscate! Clarity over big words
is always best. Make your point right
away so no one has to work to see
what you are saying. Be current. Cite
the latest stuff, as well as the original
material, no matter how old it is. Use
Georef, Biosis and other bibliographic
search engines to make sure you
have the relevant literature on the
topic. Remember, if you miss some-
one’s paper that really should be cited,
they will remember you a long time.
Better to find those—all authors love
to see themselves cited, especially
when their papers are important to
yours. Your reputation will grow, if you
say nice things about them.

2. Publish in great places that mat-
ter. Will prominent paleontologists
read your papers? It will do you little
good to publish in the Journal of
Material Sciences. Choose Palaeon-
tologica Electronica, Paleobiology,
3. Great illustrations count. Sharp images, and clear, bold diagrams. "A picture is worth a thousand words and a good or bad reputation" (I added the last phrase). If you publish in color, as you can in Palaeontologica Electronica, be kind to the "color handicapped" readers (see end note).

4. Give great and enjoyable talks. Have fun, and your stage fright may diminish. Most importantly, have really nice slides, and now with computers and digital cameras you can really impress everyone. Slides are to help the audience. If they also help you give the talk, so much the better. Many of the people who are critical to your reputation can’t see very well anymore or, like many paleontologists, are color blind. Some can’t hear well, either. Keep these folks in mind—they mean a lot to your reputation. Use BIG and few words on your slides. Use color carefully (endnote again). Over 50% of your audience will really think you are good, if they can just see your slides. Use the microphone. Speak well. Don’t read. Practice!

5. Let your buddies in paleontology read or hear about your work before you send it in. They’ll think you’re neat and they might help you too.

6. Be sure to thank everyone who helped. That one person you thank, whether it is your major professor or the collector who merely tossed a fossil into your collecting bag, will remember when you do, that you are a swell person and a good paleontologist. Thanks are of little effort and the payoff is high!

7. Build trust. Don’t do any of those things I mentioned in my last editorial! You really don’t want that kind of reputation, and I gather that there are quite enough of those folks around anyway. And not just among paleontologists.

8. Be nice. Be kind. Speak well of other paleontologists. You never know how your comments may be relayed to the next paleontologist.

9. Be humble, but interesting. Everyone is an expert on something in our field, and we don’t like self-important paleontologists telling us how good they are. Just have fun discussing your work and opinions.

10. Smile a lot. Everybody loves a smile. Everybody feels good with a genuine smile. It won’t hurt either.

11. Keep your sense of humor polished. People like that. Because we have so much in paleontology to be joyful about, we don’t need sourpusses.

12. And, above all, have fun. When you have fun, everyone around you will too. The excitement of the dig, the thrill of discovery, the pleasure in excellent research, and the pride in doing a good paper or talk all make for enormous fun and happiness. There you have it. Nothing special here and you should have heard it many times before in one context or another. But with paleontologists out there who practice "How to get a reputation in paleontology Part I", perhaps you will forgive me for reminding you again of these steps.

A special note about color: Many of us are color blind, or more properly "color deficient" (What Is Colorblindness and the Different Types? [Waggoner 2003]). About 1 in 12 men and 1 in 200 women have this condition, and 99% of those are red and/or green "weak". This condition makes cer-
tain color images a trial for these people, and even our best websites and journals miss this (see Breaking the Color Barrier [Holden 2002]). In paleontology, color deficiencies seem to run higher than that, perhaps because as students these people migrate to topics where color is not critical. Imagine a color-deficient petrologist or cytologist! Two factors are important—the color of the object and the color of the background. Hues of red and green on blue or yellow may mean that 10% of the people you want to impress, can’t be but instead will be frustrated—and there goes a chunk of your reputation right down the tubes. Make your colors bold and saturated (Color Vision, Color Deficiency [Wilson 1996]), and never use colors (especially reds and greens) as keys to your slides; patterns are better. If you must use colors, as in some illustrations, try converting the reds to magenta (see Color Blind-Friendly Presentation (Okabe and Ito 2002) for this and other suggestions). Thus, overall a significant part of your audience will like you a whole lot when you show slides that have colors that they can see (you can test this now on-line at sites like Vischeck that will show you what an image looks like to a color deficient person). A little work will go a long way in making your reputation secure in everyone’s mind!

REFERENCES