

Fly Me to the Moon: what science communicators could learn from marketing professionals





Hannah Little
Lecturer in Communication and Media, University of Liverpool

The new romantic comedy *Fly me to the Moon* tells the story of how, in the run up to the Apollo 11 mission, Nasa hired a high-flying marketing specialist to bolster public support. The history books tell us this isn't quite what happened, but I believe modern science communicators could still learn from this irreverent revision of Nasa's history.

In the opening scenes of Fly Me To The Moon, Kelly Jones (Scarlett Johansson), is recruited by shady government officials to sell one of the biggest thing one can sell: the Moon. The premise may seem far-fetched. After all, who doesn't already love the Moon? Why would we even need to sell the exciting prospect of a man landing on it? In 2024, we look back on the 1969 Moon mission with rose-tinted glasses.

In reality though, throughout the 1960s, the majority of US citizens felt that the huge cost of the Apollo missions was not worth their money. "Americans are over their long and very expensive honeymoon in space," Jones chirpily tells a sceptical Nasa employee. "I'm here to remind them why they fell in love in the first place." As she gets started in her mission to collect the human stories behind Apollo 11, we see Jones hit with opposition from Nasa's workforce, concerned her attempts will undermine the science. The launch director tells her: "My guys are too weird for interviews and they're actually really busy doing life and death work." In the face of reluctance and hostility, she starts to make up her own stories, of engineers with rocket fuel in their blood and a childhood love of the stars, and a director with an airman father who died in the line of duty.

Next year, Nasa is planning to launch its Artemis 3 lunar mission, sending humans to the Moon's surface for the first time in nearly 50 years. But things aren't what they were in the 60s. **The further away** we've got from seeing Neil Armstrong make one small step, **the stronger** public support for returning to the Moon has got.

That doesn't mean there is support for all areas of science. Down on Earth, pandemics and the existential threat of the climate crisis have highlighted the importance in how people feel and communicate about science. At times, in pockets of the USA, misinformation and science denial are winning out. So could scientists can learn something from PR and marketing professionals?

Research from cognitive science shows that people remember certain stories, and pass them on more faithfully, better than others. In particular, we remember human stories with social relationships and motivations, counter-intuitive stories that surprise us and negative stories where nothing good happens.



If telling the story of Apollo 11, for example, communicators might want to highlight counter-intuitive aspects such as the fact that a modern smart phone has more than one million times the memory of the computer aboard Apollo 11. Negative aspects could be emphasised too, such as the astronauts who tragically died in the Apollo 1 tragedy, or more social angles about scientists and engineers behind the scenes. Marketing professionals and journalists have known about and used these cognitive biases for a long time. And it seems conspiracy theorists are also taking advantage of these tricks too. I challenge you to find me a conspiracy theory that isn't counter-intuitive, or about complex social motivations, or about bad things happening. So, if those pedalling misinformation are using these tricks from marketing, shouldn't we use them more when communicating science too?

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Questions

1. Do you think scientists should get inspiration from PR and marketing professionals? Why or why not?

2. If you had to communicate more (or even shoot a movie) about one current or past scientific issue, which would it be and why?

3. Which of these tricks from cognitive science would you use to have a scientific issue popularized: social relations and motivations? counter-intuitive stories that surprise us? or negative stories where nothing good happens?
Justify: what would the pros or cons be?

⚠ **To answer, use double comparatives as underlined in the article.**

Double comparatives are phrases commonly used in English to express increasing or decreasing returns. English speakers often employ double comparatives to underline the importance of doing or not doing a certain activity. Here are some examples of double comparatives:

- *The more you study, the more you learn.*
- *The more time you take, the better the assignment you turn in.*
- *The less money I spend, the less I have to worry about saving.*
- *The less you worry about the others, the less they will bother you.*

As you can see from these examples, the format of double comparatives is as follows:
The (more / less) + (noun / noun phrase) subject + verb + , + the (more / less) + (noun) subject + verb
You can use 'more' and 'less' double comparatives with adjectives too. In this case, the structure places the comparative adjective first:
The + comparative adjective + (noun) + subject + verb, the + comparative adjective + it is + infinitive

- *The easier the test is, the longer students will wait to prepare.*
- *The faster the car is, the more dangerous it is to drive.*
- *The crazier the idea is, the more fun it is to try.*
- *The more difficult the task is, the sweeter it is to succeed.*