

The Golden Rule for Writers

A recent experience with a blogger ‘losing his way’ was a painful reminder to me that not everyone shares the same rules or moral compass when it comes to the things we write and publish, even when we share a similar background. I thought it might be helpful if I spelled out one of my most important personal rules that I apply to all my writing, and explain why I think it is the best approach. In the end, I hope this concept will be imitated by others, especially those who do not currently follow it.

First, I must tell a personal tale, which will help to explain the origin of the principle I follow.

My first experience speaking in public as a scientist -- actually as a nervous graduate student wearing a plaid jacket and a very wide green tie -- happened in December of 1975, when I made a presentation at the Magnetism and Magnetics Materials conference, held that year in Philadelphia. Incidentally, this location was near the center of the universe for me, about a mile from my birthplace, a few miles away from where I grew up and a few subway stops from the University of Pennsylvania, where I was a student. My paper was mildly critical of some of the work by two well-known scientists at the GE research center, Drs. Martin and Benz, who had also provided me with some SmCo₅ magnet samples for my research. Ironically, the same Dr. Martin was the chairman of the session where I presented my paper. After he introduced me, the first words out of my mouth were my criticism of his work. Even so, there was no contentious discussion after my presentation, just a couple of questions and then on to the next paper.

Several things from that event many years ago remain with me today. First, my advisor, Dr. Chad Graham, was careful to discuss our work and conclusions with Dr. Martin long before the presentation. Second, I presented data, along with our interpretation and understanding of that data. There was no attack on any person or institution, which would have been completely unjustifiable and inappropriate. Third, Dr. Martin was a gentleman and a scholar. He never complained and, in fact, we interacted professionally many times after that experience over the following decade, including writing a paper together [1].

So my rule for writing about people and ideas is simple. If at all possible, I always contact anyone I plan to mention in my articles beforehand, to be



Dr. Stan Trout has more than 30 years experience in the permanent magnet and rare earth industries. Dr. Trout has a B.S. in Physics from Lafayette College and a Ph.D. in Metallurgy and Materials Science from the University of Pennsylvania. Stan is a contributing columnist for Magnetics Business and Technology magazine and the Director of the Magnet Business for Molycorp Minerals, LLC. Spontaneous Materials, his consultancy, specializes in technical training on magnetics. He can be reached at strout@ieee.org.

sure that I have captured their words, thoughts and ideas correctly and clearly. If something needs to be adjusted, we carefully do that before publication. Second, when I present a controversial point of view, I always invite anyone who contacts me with a differing perspective to write an article expressing their ideas without any interference. Magnetics Magazine does an excellent job in this regard, providing an open forum for all ideas to be proposed, explained and defended.

Why do I think my method is the preferred way to write? It is good on many levels. First, it obeys the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Second, it is the way I was trained as a scholar, to seek the truth via the scientific method. Third, it is usually easy to do and the exchange of ideas can prove to be enlightening. Fourth, it tends to trade on facts and data, which are ultimately verifiable. Finally, it avoids rumors, guessing and speculation, which are often inaccurate.

This last reason is a very critical one for us today and, perhaps, the most compelling of all. It is discouraging to discover so much information floating around that is incorrect or flawed in some way. Moreover, it is frustrating to know that most of these errors could be easily corrected, but aren't, out of ignorance, laziness or stubbornness. The fact that someone can write an article and post it on a web site doesn't attest to its veracity; rather, it only proves the writer has access to a computer and little else. Spreading inaccurate information only serves to add to the chaos in a world of ideas that seems chaotic enough already. And, it makes me ask: do we really need more chaos or do we need more sanity? I'll vote for sanity.

So let me end with a plea for sanity. If you write something for publication, check to see if you have accurate information before you publish. Don't be guilty of passing around flawed information. It isn't helpful for you, your reputation or our industry.

[1] Squareness Ratio for Various Rare Earth Permanent Magnets, D. L. Martin, H. F. Mildrum and S. R. Trout, Eighth International Workshop on Rare Earth Magnets and Their Applications (1985) pp.269-278.