

Resolve to Never Be Wrong Again

It's a little late in the holiday shopping season to bang my annual Buy Local Drum (or my Donate To The Needy Instead Of Buying More Unnecessary Presents For Your Ungrateful Relatives Drum), so let's pretend I already did that and look ahead to 2012.

I don't usually make New Year's resolutions, but I made an exception last year because I endured a period of time during which it seemed like I was constantly wrong. Any male who lives with any female should be accustomed to it, but this was even worse.

All of us have had occasions when we felt certain about something that subsequently turned out not to be the case. The final straw for me occurred last year when I received a bill from the Chamber of Commerce for an event that I didn't recall attending, so I sent them a polite email declining to pay and suggesting they recheck their records. They responded with a digital photo taken at the event that clearly showed me holding a glass of wine and chatting with other attendees.

Busted! In my own lame defense, I subsequently remembered that I had shown up at the last minute -sandwiching it between two other commitments - and had forgotten all about it by the time the bill came two months (!) later. But it was embarrassing enough that I vowed never to be that sure of anything again.

Believe it or not - and with only minor effort on my part - I'm happy to say that I haven't been wrong about anything since then. Really. Not that I think I'm any smarter than everybody else, although I have my suspicions.

Think about it - we all have hundreds of chances to be wrong every day. Every time someone asks you a question, your response is subject to scrutiny. The trick is to phrase your answer in a way that is impossible to contradict.

For example, “What time is it?” seems like a simple enough question posed to anyone wearing a wristwatch, but is it really the time your watch indicates? It could be running slow due to a low battery, or you may have missed the Daylight Savings Time change or space aliens could have placed you in a temporal time warp. You never know.

The beauty of this technique is that you don’t need to consider every unlikely scenario when answering – you simply phrase your response in a way that cannot be “wrong.” My answer to the above question is “my watch says 8:05.” That may or may not be the correct time, but it tells the questioner what he or she needs to know in a way that cannot be challenged, even if it’s actually 9:30 and you have just caused someone to miss his or her flight to Europe.

That’s a simple example, but once you train yourself in the basics you find yourself using a similar strategy with every response. For those of you in a hurry who don’t want to think about precise sentence construction on the fly, I recommend preceding every answer with “I could be mistaken, but.” This leaves plenty of wiggle room with whatever response you are giving. For example, “I could be mistaken, but I’m pretty sure the world is not flat.”

Normally you don’t need to be too concerned about your answers to questions that solicit an opinion, because an opinion cannot technically be “wrong.” However, this assurance won’t help you with questions like “Do these slacks make my butt look big,” where any response (or non-response) is catastrophic. It’s a trap! Run!

I derive a perverse amount of confidence and self-esteem from never being wrong, even though it’s not exactly the same thing as being right. Being right usually involves a certain amount of training, intelligence, expertise or research, all of which require too much effort. I’m just happy picking the low-hanging fruit.

Give this some thought while considering your New Year’s resolutions. I could be mistaken, but January first is only three weeks away.

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