

HOW DID BILL NYE (THE SCIENCE GUY®) GET FAMOUS? By Ross Shafer

Over the years I have been quizzed countless times, “*Did you really invent the Science Guy?*” The answer is “NO!” His parents, Ned and Jaqueline Nye, were responsible for that.

However, I can lay claim to being the first guy to put Bill Nye on TV - and first coined the “Science Guy.” To be honest, it wasn’t a clever premeditated choice. As I brought Bill on my TV stage the first time, I simply blurted the alliteration out of sheer desperation.

Let me back up.

When I first met Bill, he and I were both aspiring (albeit moonlighting) standup comedians. My full time job was the advertising director for a chain of young men’s clothing stores. Bill worked full time as an aerospace engineer for Boeing Aircraft Company. His job was clearly more important. Bill invented the hydraulic pressure resonance suppressor tube used in 747 airplanes. I mean, c’mon! His job focused upon saving lives. Mine focused on fitting the right inseam.

At night, Bill and I would haunt the local Seattle area comedy clubs trying to get laughs. We competed in several comedy contests. In between sets, Bill would talk about his hobbies; Frisbee football, Bike racing, and Ballroom dancing. I, on the other hand, complained about my horrible luck with women. Bill was energized and practical. I was critical and irrational.

We were best friends. Still are.

Were we funny? Well, in the early years the answer was “occasionally.” But to us, these smokey, dark nightclubs were a sort of comedy university. Bill knew he was a funny person. His delivery was smart and confident. One of my favorite Bill Nye jokes was directed toward a random audience member, “*Where are you from?*” he would ask. The person would say New York City or Chicago. Bill would light up and say, “*Oh, do you know Bob?*” Drunk audiences took awhile to catch onto the irony of the gag. But Bill “sold” the punchline so well I laughed every time. He did a wicked impression of Steve Martin to the point of winning a Steve Martin look-alike contest.

Bill’s material was also more unique than anyone else’s. He had at least ten minutes of technical engineering jokes, “*How can you tell an extroverted engineer? He stares at YOUR shoes when he’s talking to you.*” Want another one? “*What do engineers use for birth control? Their personalities.*” Bill also did a spot on impersonation of William Shatner’s Captain James T. Kirk of *Star Trek* fame. We kept trying to write jokes around that skill...but nothing stuck.

By 1983, I won the Seattle International Comedy Competition and starting touring as a professional comic. Bill went back to work at Boeing (and later Sundstrand Corporation).

The following year, I was gathering enough momentum as a TV guest comedian that I was spotted by Pat Cashman of KING Television in Seattle. KING was the NBC affiliate station and was looking to create a local Comedy/Talk show much like David Letterman had done in Los Angeles. My good friend Jim Sharp and I wrote the show while producers Make Warner and Dana Dwinnell shot the pilot (called Take Five). Miraculously KING-TV gave us an order for (13) episodes. Jim later convinced the station to call the show *Almost Live*. It ran for 13 seasons.

In the first year of *Almost Live* our job was to hire staff. One of our first hires was Bill Nye. I loved his quirky style and his supreme confidence. When Bill showed up at the first “pitch” meeting (where writers submit their ideas) I noticed something peculiar about Bill that I

hadn't spotted all the time I knew him. Random science magazines kept falling out of his backpack. I'm talking about magazines like, *American Mensa*, *Little Known Quanta Fluids*, and *International Wing Nut Quarterly*. One time, I asked Bill what he did when they got together and he said, "*Me and some of my scientist buddies sit around and misquote Carl Sagan.*" You can't buy that kind of hilarity.

So, now we have a certified genius on our staff. Bill submitted one odd idea after another. *Speed Walker* was Bill playing a crime fighting character who walked pretty fast. Another idea was Bill playing the conductor of the *Channel 5 News Train*; where we could cover any news story as long as it was near a railroad track. I think we could only afford to pay him \$50 or \$75 a week.

Then one day, fifteen minutes before air time, Geraldo Rivera cancelled his celebrity appearance on our show. He either had the flu or was waiting for dry cleaning. That meant we had an emergency six-minute guest slot to fill at the top of the show.

NOTE: To be fair, a lot of years have passed. Bill claims the guest was Rita Jenrette, the wife of U.S Senator John Jenrette. Jenrette was convicted for taking a bribe during the [ABSAM investigation](#) in October of 1980. Rita was a guest on our show not because of her husband's scandal but because she had just posed in Playboy magazine and was also starring in her first motion picture, *Zombie Island Massacre*.

Regardless of whether the emergency was made possible because of Geraldo or Rita, the cancelled guest emergency was an opportunity to birth a star. The audience was being "warmed-up" by our house band as they got seated in the soundstage. We literally had about (15) minutes until the camera crews would start recording the show. We had no back up plan. In a panic, I turned to Bill and pleaded, "*Can you give any kind aircraft report from Boeing?*" He said, "*Nope, that's classified.*" I said, "How about any kind of science demonstration from one of your magazines?" Without missing a beat he said, "*Yeah, I could do something pretty hilarious with a tub of Liquid Nitrogen.*" I didn't know a thing about liquid nitrogen but we had a show to put on.

Apparently one of Bill's friends owed him a favor and Bill was able to get liquid nitro on short notice. The show started on time. And, without any rehearsal, Bill strolled out in full swagger and dipped an onion in the liquid nitrogen. He used tongs to yank it out of the dip and shattered the onion like it was a piece of glass. Then, he "roasted" marshmallows in the (minus) 325-degree fluid, popped one in his mouth, and blew steam out of his nose like a dragon!

Bill Nye was an instant hit! the audience went wild!

Our ratings skyrocketed every time he appeared on our show. So did our ad revenue. I also hosted a daily afternoon drive radio show at the time (KJR-AM) and every afternoon at 4:00pm Bill Nye would come on the show and answer our listener's science questions. What kind of questions? "*Why do I sneeze when I look at the sun?*" Bill would say, "*That's called a photic sneeze reflex. About half of the people in the United States are affected by it.*" Whether that was true or not, it sounded authentic and Bill became a breakout TV and radio star. His wild popularity made it possible for him to take part time consulting work at aeronautical companies while he pursued his dream to be on TV.

Our *Almost Live* producer, Bill Stainton, sent the first video tape of Bill and I to David Letterman in New York. Soon afterward, Bill appeared on Dave's NBC Late Night Show. This appearance caught the attention of Disney's Mickey Mouse Club and Bill was cast as a series regular. It's interesting to note that three young cast members on that show also went on to show business greatness; Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, and actor Ryan Gosling.

Disney loved Bill so much they collaborated with he, Erin Gottlieb and Jim McKenna to create the Bill Nye, the Science Guy® TV show. That Emmy® Award winning TV series has been shown all over the world for nearly 30 years. Teachers still use the ideas from Bill's

monthly newsletter and choose experiments from his website in their classrooms. (www.Nyelabs.com). Bill has had several other successful television shows; including *The Eyes of Nye* and his current Netflix hit *Bill Nye Saves The World*. Bill was also the highest rated celebrity guest dancer on the ABC hit *Dancing with the Stars*.

To date, Bill has won (19) Emmy® awards and was even asked to join the NASA Mars Team and he came up with the idea to put small sundials on each of the two Mars Rovers (Odyssey and Spirit) so that kids on earth could see what time it was on Mars. Why sundials? His father Ned Nye loved sundials so much that he documented the location of every sundial in the eastern United States. When Bill was a boy, Ned even wrote a book titled, *Sundials of the Northeast*. As a tribute to his father, Bill put sundials on the planet Mars.

The Bill Nye story is important for you, too. I'd challenge you to keep a sharp eye open for your own "Bill Nye." I guarantee there is someone within your organization may be inadvertently wasting their outside talents because you haven't given them a chance yet.. Everyone is harboring hidden skills that could be put to use for your company. What magazines do your people read. What do they surf on the Net? What hobbies are they crazy about? What clubs have they joined. Allow them to exercise their natural passions at work and you'll have a burgeoning revenue stream. You will also have a company ambassador your customers will love.

ABOUT ROSS SHAFER:

ROSS SHAFER is the preeminent keynote speaker on CHANGE & RELEVANCE. He has authored (9) business books, won (2) International stand-up comedy competitions, and earned (6) TV Emmys as a network talk and game show. He has also bought and sold 23 different companies. As a veteran of more than 2,600 keynote speeches, you might want to have Ross speak at your next conference <https://RossShafer.com>

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