

Strays – The benefit of the doubt

In all your online adventures, you might have come across somebody who has asked a very rudimentary question, like *What frequencies can I use on ham radio?* Your first inclination might have been to answer the person by drawing from your own deep pool of wisdom and experience. But after a second or two, you might also have begun to wonder where this question came from. I mean, *shouldn't he already know this? Didn't he take a ham radio course like the rest of us? Wasn't that question on the exam?*



When we do encounter a question as seemingly simple and fundamental as this one, we have two options: **1) offer a helpful and intelligent answer**, or **2) let somebody else answer**. When we choose to answer the question, we should give the person what we call the *benefit of the doubt*. That old phrase means that, *since we might not know the origin or background of the question, we should presume the person asking does have some baseline knowledge of the topic*, and maybe is looking for further information.

In college, we're taught that we write essays and articles geared toward a particular audience. We can't know exactly what our audience will know in advance, while writing the paper, so we're also taught that we must presume that our readers are *intelligent but uninformed*. When answering people's questions, our habits should reflect that same approach and attitude, that our listeners are *intelligent but uninformed*.

What this means is, belittling or berating a person for asking a seemingly fundamental question is completely inappropriate in any kind of setting. Telling the person to **RTFM** (*read the flippin' manual*), or to Google for the answer, or to get licensed, is not in keeping with the spirit of amateur radio. It's much better to point out in the manual where you got the information, or what links to visit. Often, a person who's new to the craft *might not even know* what questions to ask, let alone know what to Google for.

For the question that was asked above, *What frequencies can I use on ham radio?* It's very possible that the person is unlicensed, and is investigating whether to get into the hobby, maybe to satisfy a communication need. It's possible that the questioner is disabled, very young, or elderly, and does not have the same access to information that you do. It's also possible that his native language is not English, or that he has a learning issue.

Finally, it's possible that the person has passed the exam, but missed this particular question. I mean, did you get a perfect score on the exam? If so, congratulations! But the overwhelming majority of normal candidates did not. And why not? There can be a number of reasons, but again, I will presume that it's because they are intelligent, but were uninformed...or just forgot.

What are your thoughts? Email editor@utaharc.org