

AUDIENCE STRATEGY FOR ALL PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

WHY IS STRATEGY IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION IMPORTANT TO YOU?

While this particular career-management resource tool, at first, may seem to you unrelated to your “getting the job done,” in fact, the following information ultimately will make the tasks of the job search easier and more effective and will help boost your self-confidence.

Communication is the use of language to inform, to persuade, or to change someone.

Using an intelligent audience strategy is the key to successful communication, whether in job-search documents, in academic papers, or on-the-job writing and professional presentations.

Howard Gardner, author of *Leading Minds*, says that effective communication is the key to leadership. According to the book, *The Guru Guide*, CEOs overwhelmingly say that in managing change “you can never do enough to get your message across to your people.”

This translates into employers saying that excellent communication skills are the number one priority on their list of qualifications for a successful candidate.

Perhaps, this skill is so highly ranked because we know that communication is the most difficult of all human interactions.

In a typical exchange in both formal and informal business interactions, more often than not the message is garbled on both sides:

- The speaker, intent on making a point, does not plan or design the message specifically so that the particular audience will absorb the content and act deliberately.
- And, generally, the receiver does not listen or read to understand the content of the message but, rather, stays internally focused on personal agendas.

You can take control over this seemingly impossible process by learning communication strategy, techniques, and tools.

The idea behind an audience-strategy approach is simple: always focus your message on the needs and goals of your audience.

The idea may be simple, but the process is complex. Your objective is to inform, to persuade, or to change your audience, all the while helping them be in control of the decision, results, or problem-solution.

WHY DO WE ALL HAVE SUCH A HARD TIME COMMUNICATING?

Why do we find being honest, clear, and genuine so difficult?

HOW DO INFANTILE NEEDS AND SOCIALIZATION AFFECT US TODAY?

As newborns, we instinctively know how to connect directly with our feelings: we are hungry, tired, wet, lonely, or bored, so we cry. And our caregivers come running. As we become toddlers, our parents begin the process of socialization, taming our selfish spirit, so that we may get along with others in our family and community.

As children, we hit the object of our anger or scream when we are frustrated, and these outbursts reflect our real feelings. Our parents' responsibility is to tame us and move us from the insatiable, "Me, me. I want. I need," to our adopting a worldview which shares the planet in some harmony with others.

We are willing to give up the autonomy and selfishness of infancy because humans desire affection and recognition, first from parents and family, then from teachers, peers, and colleagues.

Society reinforces over and over that the more something is at stake and stressful, whether in social or business relationships, the more careful, controlled, and civilized we must become.

We learn that to become a functioning member of society that we must filter our feelings through a private censor; as we do so, the straight line between our inner feelings and our outward behaviors eventually is detoured or disconnected. We become experts at self-deception, both in understanding ourselves and in our dealings with the external public.

We become poor communicators because we are detached from how we really feel and what we really mean. We are civilized and socially acceptable but incapable of delivering an honest, straightforward message.

WHAT MOTIVATES US AT WORK?

We have been taught that feelings do not belong at work, but, of course as human beings, our feelings are with us all the time

- We crave **status** which involves giving the power to others to convey our worth.
- We judge our personal worth through our **useful contribution** to our organization.
- We want **affirmation** and **acceptance** by the group.
- We know that **money**, especially the amount, symbolizes our value in the workplace and feeds our sense of personal **security**.

WHY DO WE CARE ABOUT OUR PUBLIC IMAGE?

Because we give strangers power over fulfilling these, our basic human needs, we try to protect ourselves by creating a public image that pictures us in control, strong, and independent.

Most of our interactions with others are based on what we would like to be true, or what is supposed to be true, or on what we think our audience wants to hear:

"How are you doing?" "Great!"/ "Can you give me this report by four?" "No problem."/ "Do you understand what I want?" "Sure, of course, I do."

We are so concerned about our image of competence that we actually spend more energy in anxiety than in work itself. The results often are that we do not make a deadline, or perform the task satisfactorily, or that we turn our frustration into a show of anger with colleagues or subordinates.

If this theory makes sense to you, how can you turn this self-awareness and knowledge into better communication?

First, now you can understand others because you finally understand yourself-- you are a vulnerable human being trying to communicate in a world of many layers and subtexts.

We are the same, and we have differences. Adjusting our communication behaviors to recognize this truth will allow us to frame and transmit messages appropriately and to be more effective and powerful.

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE LISTEN?

Paying attention is a gift from the audience to the speaker, a momentary surrender of control.

An audience will respond, either purposely or unconsciously:

- if the message is in their self-interest
- if they trust and believe the person delivering the message
- if they like the message itself.

Understanding and addressing audience motivations is the first step in making your connection.

HOW CAN YOU GET THIS ATTENTION?

The next step in grabbing the audience's attention is to manage intentionally the audience perceptions of you, as well as their expectations: literally, you must explain your relationship to your audience and establish your professional identity:

- What is your personal style in dress and in manner? What climate do you create to make your audience interested and engaged?

Audiences will respond both viscerally and intellectually. Think about speakers you have heard and documents you have read: What qualities are attractive and appealing and what characteristics are negatives?

You must establish your credibility, image, identity, and reputation:

- Who are you in relation to this particular audience?
- Whom or what do you represent?
- What does the audience need to know about you?

Even if you are the youngest or newest in the workplace or with the least professional experience, you can establish credibility by doing your homework and having self-confidence.

French, Raven, and Kotter, social power theorists, believe five factors influence professional credibility. Initially-- before communication—credibility is important so that the audience pays attention, and after the communication, your credibility is critical to effect a positive audience follow-through:

- **Rank**
- **Goodwill**
- **Expertise**
- **Image**
- **Shared values**

To establish **rank**, based on hierarchical power, emphasize your title or position.

You also can connect with your audience by referring to a relationship with someone of higher authority, introducing that person's name at the beginning of a talk or asking that person to co-sign the document.

To establish **goodwill**, based on personal relationships, refer to your track record in the field and cite the audience benefits of your message. The message you send must be ethical, honest, sincere, and genuine.

To establish **expertise**, based on your knowledge and competence, include your biography or resume, quote someone relevant whom the audience admires, or profit by a testimonial from someone the audience admires.

If relevant, include research, facts, numbers, and data and cite your sources. Be objective, specific, fair, and logical.

To establish **image**, based on professional attractiveness and the audience's desire to like you, emphasize both your personal characteristics and the skills that your audience will find admirable, trustworthy, and commendable. Make sure the audience identifies you with the stated benefits of the message.

To establish **shared values**, based on morality and ethical standards, emphasize your common goals and commitments.

WHY STYLE AND PACE ARE IMPORTANT?

Television, Sesame Street, MTV, remote controls, and the Internet have changed the pace of what we observe, how we listen, and what we will read and effected our expectations of style.

In the past, without technology, we had time and enjoyed enlarging our vocabulary and pursuing an elegant style in speech and the written word. Now, responding to a constant time crunch, we respond to the lowest common denominator in language and instant gratification.

Our reliance on television has reinforced our preference to receive messages through visual presentation, and we have become accustomed to short, repetitive phrases and images, and a distorted reality.

As a general audience, we have become passive, inattentive, bored, and dumb; we crave intensity and shock to get our attention.

Because we are all under the influence of this multimedia onslaught, business communicators need to capture audiences with some of the same understanding and flourish.

A part of your strategy must acknowledge that most audiences are comfortable with what is familiar. First responses to learning or absorbing new information can be to feel frustration and resistance, or to feel threatened and intimidated, or perhaps, to feel competitive.

So, your message needs to begin with is already known and then lead carefully to your goal of informing, persuading, or changing the audience.

And most importantly, you must realize that the words you choose and the manner in which you deliver those words can welcome or offend, and can educate or stupefy.

WHAT ARE BASIC STRATEGIES, TECHNIQUES, AND TOOLS TO BUILD YOUR CASE?

Communication has one or more basic purposes: to inform, to persuade, or to impel to change, while establishing goodwill.

So how can you organize your message so that you have the best chance of getting through and connecting positively?

- First, know the essential core of your message before you begin writing or talking. How many times do you blurt out your words before taking the time to refine the content?
- Then, tailor the information, argument, or persuasion to target the specific audience you address.

Figure out who makes up your target audience:

- The **initial audience** can decide whether to forward your message. That person may be the one who asked you to create the document or relay the message.

- The **primary** audience or main constituency decides whether to act on your recommendation or respond to the purpose of your message. You must reach this audience to accomplish your purpose.
- **Key decision-makers** are those who have ultimate power over your communication objective.
- The **secondary or hidden** audience, the shadow constituency, includes those who might see or hear about your message and those whom the message will influence whether directly or indirectly. In business writing this audience may include attorneys who may use your documents years later as evidence of corporate culture, climate, and practices in a lawsuit.
- **Gatekeepers**, the roadblock constituency, have the power to keep your message from even your primary audience. The gatekeeper can be someone with power in the company or can be the assistant who answers the phone or opens the mail.
- The **watchdog audience** studies the interaction between you and your primary audience, and, thus, may have the political and economic power to affect your career.

HOW DO YOU FIGURE OUT WHO IS IN YOUR AUDIENCE?

In order to determine your message strategy, you must first analyze your audience: is the focus a colleague or a stranger, within or outside your organization, or are you facing a cohesive gathering of individuals with similar, predictable profiles bound together by definable interests?

Some useful, and significant, tools you have for this task are your own empathy, intuition, and common sense.

However, understanding the specific organization's culture, its values, philosophies, and attitudes as well as its discourse community, the formal and informal channels of communication, is also important:

- Consider whether your communication is invited or unsolicited.
- Do you want to write or speak to have the most impact?
- Do you want to be formal or informal?
- Do you want to use group channels or address individuals?
- Do you need a quick response or do you want control over when your message is received?
- How much audience participation do you need?
- Is your audience in the same place or not?

Analyze group members in a variety of ways:

- Use demographics, measurable and objective data: learn age, gender, occupation, income, educational level, training, and level of achievement.
- Use psychographics, an analysis of qualitative characteristics like personality, attitudes, values, beliefs, traditions, goals, power and image, and lifestyles.
- Use databases, research, interviews, and questionnaires.
- Ask confidential advice from a trustworthy third party for sensitive issues.

WHAT ARE ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES TO PRODUCE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION?

One common strategy in delivering an effective, memorable message relies on including the concepts of **HEAD, HEART, AND FEET** in every communication.

HEAD stands for solid cognitive material, including concrete information and logical analysis, in the content.

- What is the attitude of the audience toward your subject? What is the probable bias to your message?
- How interested is the audience in your message?
- What does your audience already know about the topic? Do you have a mix of experts and novices?
- What does your audience need to learn?
- Do they need to know background?
- How much detail and evidence should you include?
- Do they need to know jargon or technical language?
- What are audience expectations about style and format: must you tailor your presentation to the expectations of the targeted organizational culture?
- What communication channel is appropriate? Internal/external? Written: letter, memo, report, e-mail or oral? Formal or informal? Direct or indirect?

FEET reminds you to ask the audience to remember, to do, or to feel something. The point of communication is to inform, persuade, or to change your audience.

From your **HEAD to your FEET** you must pass through your **HEART**, your emotional connection to the audience.

Even in business presentations, remember your audience consists of human beings who respond with their intellect but also with their intuition and their emotions!

To influence, motivate, and persuade these human beings, you must show your feelings, energy, and excitement.

WHAT IS ANOTHER PRODUCTIVE STRATEGY?

Many business experts tout David Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning Styles, which shows that the only way people really absorb anything thoroughly is to go through the entire cycle of learning from beginning to end.

This model transcends personality, educational level, or culture. If you organize your message on this model, your audience will follow your message easily, will, more likely, absorb the message and, most likely, will be informed, persuaded, or inclined to change.

The strategy has four parts which flow together. You must address each one in order:

- **WHY?** Since psychology tells us that external motivation is a weak reinforcement to learn, help the audience to internalize their motivation to follow your presentation. You can do this by pointing out the audience benefits from attending to your message.
- **WHAT?** Introduce, order, and analyze information in a logical, straightforward manner (the same as the concept of **HEAD** in **HEAD, HEART, AND FEET**).
- **HOW DOES THIS WORK?** Give pertinent, practical operational details. Help the audience understand how your message will work for them or give them specific suggestions or models to try your plan on their own.
- **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?** Restate the rewards for your audience. Help the audience accept your information as a positive change or adopt your ideas for their own use.

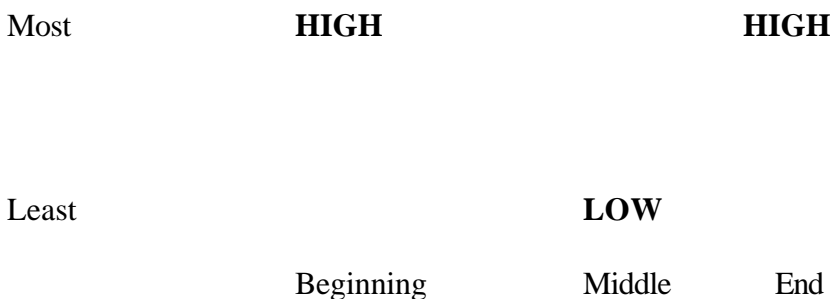
WHAT ARE EXPECTED BUSINESS FORMATS FOR BUSINESS MESSAGES?

In **TELL/SELL** or **INFORM/PERSUADE**, you want your audience to learn from you and respond specifically to your message. You are teaching and giving information, and your goal is for your audience to know something or do something differently.

In **CONSULT/JOIN**, you want to profit from a give-and-take with your audience; collaboration is the key. You want your audience to help with the content and information and to offer support for change.

WHAT ARE TWO HELPFUL AUDIENCE LEARNING AND RETENTION TIPS?

1. Your message strategy should pay attention to a typical **Audience Memory Curve**. Remember an audience responds both unconsciously by instinct and to internal motivation:



- Your **opening** is extremely important to grab audience attention and establish your credibility and goodwill.
 - Do not bury important ideas in the **middle** of your communication, but do try to keep your audience's attention throughout and do not be boring in the middle.
 - Your **ending** should review the benefits to the audience in an exciting, upbeat way; the audience should be eager to respond to your goals.
2. If your audience is friendly and open to your message, use the **direct/time-saving/ in-charge** approach, a method you can rely on 90% of the time.

- State the goals of your message or your chosen recommendations at the beginning of your communication; then, the audience can follow your analysis and logic and be more likely to agree with you and your suggestions.
- However, if your credibility is low, if your message is sensitive, or if you think the audience reaction will probably be negative, choose the **indirect approach, the "mystery-story" approach**.

Begin your communication with information your audience will likely find mutually satisfactory, then get them to understand that a problem exists, and, finally, build your argument by stating and rejecting alternatives with supporting information. Intentionally save your main conclusions and recommendations until the end when the audience is more receptive to you.

You want to take care that the audience does not create their own solutions as you work through the problem. You want to arouse interest in your subject and entice your audience to buy into your ideas, analysis, and recommendations.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF USING AN AUDIENCE STRATEGY?

The chances of having successful communication increase with your understanding of audience strategy, your taking time to research your audience, your knowing and preparing content intelligently, and your follow-through in adapting your message to your audience.

The bottom lines, a winning job search, money for your company, or plain personal satisfaction with a message well delivered and received are well worth the time and the effort.

And, if your ultimate goal is to take on a leadership role, heed the words of Jay Conger, of the University of Southern California's Leadership Institute:

The best leaders are storytellers who "create engaging dialogues with their audiences, structure their talks like symphonies, and use their personal energy to radiate excitement about their plans."