

Effective Business Communication

BY RICH MAGGIANI

TODAY, BUSINESS COMMUNICATION IS simple. You can communicate through email, instant messaging, your Web site, Web portals, Web casting, Web cams, streaming video, streaming audio, pod casting, video conferencing, phone conferencing, instant messaging, text messaging — not to mention mailing, telephoning, cellular phoning, faxing, and myriads of other emerging methods. Communication moves fast and furious, information is easy to find, easy to send, and easy to receive. Never before have you had so many options. Technology makes it faster and easier to communicate to a wider audience.

Or does it?

While there are more methods than ever to send a message, are you really reaching your audience? And isn't that the point? Too much communication today is focused around sending a message, telling what you want an audience to hear. But is it really something they want to hear; are they really listening to your message?

A constant barrage of messages inundate, interrupt, and overwhelm. Cell phones buzz often at inappropriate times; emails pop up to interrupt our thought flow and then contain links to even more annoying messages; web sites display annoying motion to distract and pop ups to sell unwanted items and services. It is information overload: so much to receive, so much to sort through for relevance, and so much left over to discard.

Besides having more ways to deliver messages, the methods are becoming more complicated to use. Do you know how to use all this technology, and when it is most appropriate to, say, email someone rather than phone them, send an electronic file rather than a printed version?

Take the telephone, a tool for having

a conversation. Simple to use? Consider this example.

The Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce (in Burlington Vermont) recently replaced its entire telephone system. According to Wayne Roberts, President, they had to carefully consider the cost of the new equipment, its installation, and its maintenance. He also had to consider the cost of training his staff to learn how to use the telephone and its plethora of features, juggling schedules to accommodate the training sessions, and losing productivity while staff were away from their desks and getting up to speed with the new equipment. And this is for the simple to use telephone.

As a result, today, business communication is a paradox: even with so many more methods to deliver a message, it's actually more difficult to communicate effectively. So how to cut through all that and actually communicate?

You need a plan. And a plan for clear communication requires clear thinking. The basics of this plan include what you want to say, who you want to say it to, and what you want them to do. I'll discuss these and a few other factors to consider when you want to communicate.

What are you trying to communicate?

All business communication falls into three broad categories: inform, instruct, or persuade. You either inform your audience about something you want them to know, instruct them on how to do something (such as use your new phone system), or persuade them to change their behavior in some way (purchase your product). So before you even start to formulate your message, decide what you are trying to do. Sometimes your message might be a combination of these categories. Nonetheless, one of these three

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categories will be dominant — choose that category.

Decide on one theme or goal for a message; the kernel of an idea for instance. Clear communication demands a focus, and your audience is far more likely to receive your message when it is honed around one central theme. More than one only serves to dilute your message and confuse your audience. Support this central theme, this kernel, with a handful of subordinate points. The rule of thumb here is to create at most seven points, preferably five. In actuality, though, count on three being retained so present those three first.

Beth Tanner, President of Tanner Corporate Services in Nashville Tennessee, said it best: "Businesses need a clear message with a reason behind it that's matched to their audience."

This is not an easy task. What you are trying to say has become more complex. Products continue to add features and gain complexity (think of that phone system). Services are more flexible and contain more details in order to better meet marketplace demands. People work in an increasing array of cultures and mores. In order to devise a clear

message, you must keep everything about your company in perspective and make sure what you are trying to say has relevance to your audience.

Who is your audience? The better you know your audience, the better you are able to communicate clearly with them. Internal audiences — colleagues, employees, managers — receive messages differently than external audiences — your customers, the media, and the world.

Consider this situation. You have just returned from an industry-centered conference, and need to relate your experiences and lessons learned. Your colleagues are a sophisticated audience and have a better understanding of the conference's focus and purpose. What you relate to colleagues would be different than what you relate to, say, your customers. Colleagues would be interested in your exploits and what you learned so they can perhaps learn it too; your customers would be more interested in how you can translate those experiences into better serving them.

Same situation, different themes dependent on your audience.

What do you want your audience to do? What you want, even if you do not immediately realize it, is for your audience to do something with what you have told them. Do you want your audience to hire you, increase your salary or promote you, appreciate your expertise, or simply be informed. Determine what that is before communicating. When you are clear about what you want your audience to do, there is a much higher chance that they will actually do it. Or, at the minimum, seriously consider what you want them to do.

What the best way to deliver your message? With all the different delivery options, you must choose the most appropriate for the situation.

While you have many different methods to deliver a message, let's look at a few methods where you send a message to a specific person: faxing, mailing, emailing, telephoning, and in person. With each method, you can attain a more personal level of communicating. And yet the trend in communication is towards a less personal connection: calling (and hoping to get voice mail) when a meeting is

called for, or emailing when phoning is more appropriate. "Inappropriate email," says Pat Heffernan, Co-President of Marketing Partners in Burlington Vermont, "continues to hamper business communication."

Email is a great option when you need to deliver a message, obtain a written record, and not have to worry whether the recipient is there to receive it. Email can wait to be received and read. There is also a certain detachment about it. That can be good, however this detachment can also pose problems.

Whenever possible, stepping up the delivery method to a more personal connection gains positive results. While personally communicating a message takes more time, it is also more effective. It better establishes a relationship.

How will your audience receive your message? Too much business communication is more interested in relaying a message rather than ensuring that the message has been received. This one way communication only serves to give a false sense of accomplishment. Just because a message was sent does not mean that it was received. Communication isn't about hearing yourself talk; it's about that message being received and understood and acted upon.

With more and more information coming at us from many more different sources, there is a growing tendency to quickly skim and selectively listen. People are in a hurry just so they can keep up. "There is a reluctance to confirm or clarify what has been heard," say Heffernan. This makes your job of actually reaching your audience and getting them to listen all the more challenging.

Communication must get to the point quickly, even immediately. And this point must make clear why your audience would be interested in accepting your message. Audiences can then better assess relevance even when hurrying.

Consider the concept of getting a receipt. Whenever you buy something, whether it be at a store, through the Internet, or at a restaurant, you expect to receive a receipt. The receipt states what you bought, and how much you paid. You review the receipt to make sure it is accurate, and that you got what you paid for.

The same can be true with communication. When you send a message, how do you know it has been clearly received unless you get some kind of feedback from your audience? When you are informing your audience, simple acknowledgement might be all that is needed. With other forms of communication, however, your audience might actually have to do something for you to get that receipt.

To receive this type of receipt helps edify the success of your communication, that at the very least, it was received as intended. Regardless of what you receive back, you can then apply what you gained from this receipt to better create future messages.

Consider the words you use. For a professional writer or speaker, there are no synonyms; only one word will do. A Thesaurus or a Dictionary of Synonyms exists only to help find the correct word, what it means, and how to apply it — not to find a substitute word. When I say someone is 'ebullient', I mean that they are bubbling with excitement; I do not mean that they are simply pleased or delighted (happy).

Choose your words carefully. Words carry a lot of power and meaning. Many words can mean different things to different people. Understanding your audience helps you better choose your words, the kinds of words that have a positive effect on your audience and help attain the response you intend.

Two final points to consider. Communication creates relationships. Business is all about creating relationships; positive, strong working relationships with colleagues and customers, enhancing both the company and its customers. For instance, Don Mayer, President of Small Dog Electronics in Waitsfield Vermont, uses his company's communication with both employees and customers to open a dialog to pinpoint specific areas that need attention. This kind of communication demonstrates respect, a core aspect in the foundation of a solid relationship.

Miscommunication costs. I'm not talking just about monetary costs, although those are all too real. Other costs include lost sales, wasted time, misdirection, poorer relationships, and lost credibility. Endeavor to ensure your communication is not costly, but profitable. 🍌

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