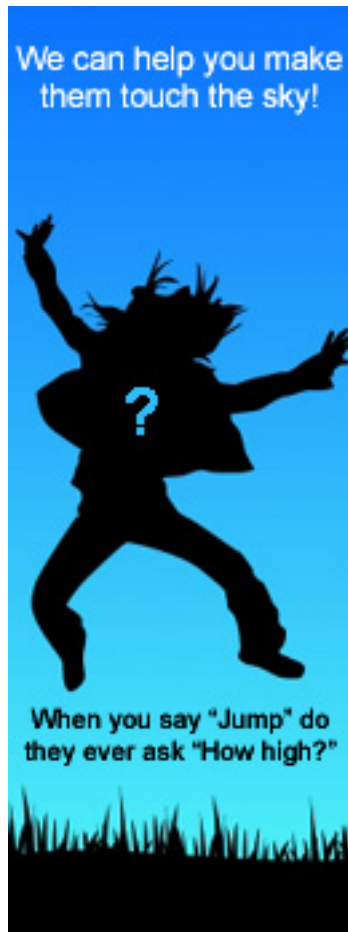


The benefits of audience driven communications

By Aileen Hunter, Director

If you read this article I can guarantee that you will be a better communicator. And if you follow the process I outline, your audiences will benefit regularly from communications that meet the mark.



My credentials

I have worked in communications for almost 20 years and now run my own communications consultancy business. I have won awards for my communications work from both the British and Scottish Communicators in Business. In addition I am a published novelist and poet.

How do you know if you've communicated something well?

I believe the best way to ensure you have communicated something as well as you can is to do the groundwork beforehand.

There's really no shortcut to producing communications that meet your needs and the needs of your audience.

All communications rely on good groundwork, either in developing relationships, or establishing respect or a good rapport with an audience. If you have something to communicate, whilst people may be obliged to listen, no one is obliged to really understand what you are trying to say. Therefore it's vital that you demonstrate you can relate to your audience, and that what you have to say has some benefit, in order to get the buy-in or action that you want.

Sometimes your communications need to be cascaded through several audiences. As the owner of the communication, you must consider how you will help this to happen. Throughout the whole cascade process, whether you are physically involved or not, you remain the owner.



People are human and needs change on a daily basis, so you can't assume that the mood of your audience, or the place they were at when you last communicated will remain the same.

I have established the following ten good practice tips as a checklist that I use to ensure that I focus my communications on the needs of the audience at any specific time. Whether it's good news or bad news, a tell or a sell, an instruction, a request or just important information which will help people to do their jobs better, the principles are the same. That's why the checklist is so useful and important.

Top 10 tips for audience driven communications

1. Understand your audience

This is the number one rule of good audience driven communications and I am constantly amazed at how many people completely disregard it. Why? Because they are self-focused and completely intent on their own message. The needs of the audience just don't come into the equation. This is the main reason why communications at all levels fail. Communications is a two-way thing – you can't give without considering carefully how it will be received. So,

- Understand all your primary and secondary audiences as well as you can - if your messages need to pass through several audiences before the final target audience is reached, you need to understand each audience.
- Really know the people you are communicating to – if you don't know them, ask someone who does, or better still, ask them yourself.
- Pre communication questionnaires, or a few phone calls to members of your audience to check out their feelings will pay you huge dividends.
- You don't have to agree with how an audience is feeling or has been behaving, but you do have to understand why they feel or act the way they do.

2. Ask yourself the who, what, why, when, how questions

These are the core communicator's questions. Answering these questions demonstrate that you have thought through the whole communications process. A communication doesn't just finish when the memo is issued or the presentation is complete. The messages need to be digested. Sometimes they are passed on to other people whether you intend them to be or not. Sometimes they require other courses of action. Quite often there are a series of other communications to follow. Thinking all of this through at the start helps you to develop your communications and plan your follow up activity in advance.



So, consider this list of questions:

Who

Who is your primary audience?

Who is your secondary audience? (i.e. to whom will your primary audience communicate this)

Will this information have an impact on anyone not in your target audience and how will you manage this?

What

What do they need to know?

What action do you want them to take?

Why

Why are you communicating this?

What are the benefits to them of knowing this?

What are the benefits to the customer/business/bottom line audience?

When

When should they be told?

When do you need them to act by - how long do they need?

How

How does it affect them?

How do you want them to feel?

How do you think they will feel and how will you manage this?

How are you going to find out how they have received and reacted to the communication?

How are you going to follow this communication up?

3. Decide on the method/methods of communication

You are now ready to decide on the method of your communication. Sometimes you have no choices here, but where you do it's important you consider the pros and cons of each approach. Understanding your audience will really help you to decide the best method – and where possible, select the best method for THEM, not for YOU.

There is no doubt that face-to-face, 1 to 1 is the best way to communicate with anyone. If you don't have that luxury, how best can you replicate that approach?

There is a myriad of communications media that I won't go into here, but knowing your audience will allow you to plan the best, integrated approach.



And remember, people often need to hear things several times, so repetition of key messages is important.

4. Always lead with benefits or relevance

This is absolutely vital for grabbing attention – the audience needs to know - 'What's in it for me?' You need to be very clear up front why your communication is important. Unless you are writing an advertising feature, there's no need to be subliminal about it – start with 'This communication is important for you because.....' If you can't articulate what the benefit of a communication is, then you seriously need to ask yourself why you are communicating it at all.

5. Personalise where possible

Your groundwork will again help you to do this. Saying things like 'you've asked', or 'feedback you've sent suggests' will give your communication that much more relevance for the audience. It also demonstrates that you've listened to them, and that you understand why the messages are important.

6. Less is usually more

We live in a world of headlines, text messages and snippets. Due to time constraints, or the inability to concentrate for long periods of time, at best people will read your first two paragraphs or skim read the whole thing. At presentations, or watching videos or TV, people very quickly start to dip in and out of what's being said. Even watching TV at home, adverts come along on average every 13 minutes to give us all a break. So bear the following in mind: -

- Summarise key messages/benefits up front
- Repeat these for maximum effect
- Use headings to introduce changes of topic for the skimmers
- Several short communications are preferable to one long one
- Keep it simple and don't be tempted to use big words to show off your superior knowledge

7. Analogies and case studies really help

Analogies and case studies make things real for people. If you can help an audience to picture themselves doing what you need them to do, or feeling how you need them to feel, it lends tremendous weight to your communications. Case studies are rife in TV nowadays – almost every makeover show is a case study. Showing people success is the very best way to help them understand what you are trying to tell them.



8. Test and refine it

The best way to ensure a communication is going to hit the mark is to test it with a sample of the audience, or with some of your knowledgeable colleagues. With communications, there's no such thing as bad feedback. Remember point 1 - you don't have to agree with your audience, but you do have to understand how they feel. For a good communicator, there's no such thing as 'I know best'. You need to take other opinions on board to ensure you've got it right.

9. Communicate for the majority

If you have issues with a handful of people, communicate your points to them directly. Don't be tempted to send a mass communication out to these people plus the hundred other colleagues who are doing everything right. That may seem obvious, but it's truly amazing how often people base communications on the few who shout the loudest, or are unhappy, or unreasonable at the expense of the many who get on quietly, correctly or happily with what they are doing. It's easy to hide behind a mass communication, but all you are likely to do is confuse the majority. Once again this comes down to really knowing and understanding your audience – don't tar everyone with the same brush!

10. Always follow it up

Despite all of your best efforts, communications can sometimes still miss the mark. That's why following them up is vital. In addition, for future reference you need to know what worked well, so that you can repeat it at the next opportunity. Have people done what you needed them to do? If not, why not? If so, great you can move on and implement the next part of your plan. If you don't follow up communications, and check for reaction, you've trivialized your own communication. This stage is the start of the groundwork for your next communication.

You don't have to be a literary genius or a great presenter to be a good communicator. If you follow my 10 key tips you will naturally produce great, benefited communications for your audiences. You'll immediately realise the benefits of doing this – good communication is key to a successful business.