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Making The Message Matter

By Christine G. Springer

Whether your goal is to build consensus, collaborate with colleagues, boost business, win political office, inspire employees or convince stakeholders to come on board, how the message is delivered can mean the difference between success and failure. Words are used to influence and motivate because they connect thought with emotion. The key to successful communication, in my experience, is to take the imaginative leap of putting yourself into the listener's shoes, to follow the rules that we know work in communicating and to use words and phrases that resonate.

It is important to know that how the message is understood is strongly influenced by the experiences and biases of the listener. How an individual perceives what is said is even more real, in the practical sense, than the speaker's intent. The message's meaning transcends authorial intention and is first subject to interpretations, emotions and even distortions of the individuals that receive it. It is critical therefore, to go beyond our own understanding and to look at the world from the listener's point of view because their experience, education and perceptions define what is actually heard.

Knowing the rules of language is important given the sheer amounts of communication that the average person contends with on a daily basis. Individuals are inundated with advertisements, song lyrics, commercial jingles, clipped conversations and abbreviated e-mails which often overwhelm and are received as noise. The following ten rules have come to define successful communication in such a noisy world. First, use simple or small words that don't require a dictionary because most Americans won't go there to determine the difference between *effect* and *affect*. Second, be as brief as possible. Never use a sentence when a phrase will do and try not to use four words when three work just as well. Third, be sincere. People have to believe to buy what you are saying. If your words lack sincerity or if they contradict accepted facts, circumstances or perceptions, they will either fly over the individuals head or not have any impact. Fourth, be consistent. Repeat important points and model yourself after the Energizer Bunny that keeps going and going and going. Fifth, offer something new. Words that work often involve a new definition of an old idea that turns a light on in the listener's mind. Sixth, use sound and texture to make the message memorable. A string of words that have the same first letter, the same sound or the same syllabic cadence is more memorable than a random collection or a familiar repetition of the same old sounds. Seventh, be aspirational. Messages need to say what people want to hear so they should be personalized and humanized triggering an emotional remembrance. Eighth, paint a vivid picture using an analogy or a slogan that will be remembered for a lifetime or at least until buy-in because the listener can see it and feel it just as M&M's "melt in your mouth, not in your hand." Ninth, ask a question. A statement when put in the form of a rhetorical question, has a much greater impact than a plain assertion and also gets the listener involved in the conversation. Tenth, provide context and relevance so that the listener gets the "why" before the "therefore" and is able to establish the message's value, its impact and most importantly, its relevance.

One example of effective communication that comes to mind is Rudy Giuliani in 1993 running for Mayor of New York City. He was encouraged to talk about *public safety* rather than *crime* and *criminals*. Polling showed that the community placed a higher priority on personal and public safety than on fighting crime or even getting tough on criminals. The distinction was important. *Fighting crime* is procedural and *getting tough on criminals* is punitive. *Safety*, however, is personal and most of all aspirational. As a result, Giuliani adopted not just an anti-crime message but a pro-public safety agenda and his success in New York City, in my opinion, led to the reframing of the way that we as Americans think about crime, criminals and a safe, civil society.

Words and phrases that resonate in today's world cut to the heart of fundamental beliefs and to core values. Not all these words work with every listener but they provide a menu of options when structuring our message. First, *imagine* – this word evokes something different in each person who hears it and in doing so, personalizes the message. Second, *accountability* – Americans want government, non-profits and businesses to be held accountable for actions and for how they treat their customers, their employees and the community. Third, *results* and a *can-do spirit* because individuals want tangible benefits that can be seen, heard, felt and otherwise quantified and they also want to know that effort went into achieving those results. Fourth, *renew, revitalize, rejuvenate, restore, rekindle, reinvent* – the “*re*” words that take the best elements or ideas of the past and improve them for more effective use in the present and the future. Fifth, *the right to* – because Americans continue to be committed to the concept of rights. Sixth, *citizen centered or client centered* – because most people want the program or the policy to better the lives of human beings. Seventh, *independent* – meaning having no conflicts of interest, hidden motives, secrets or constricting ties. Eighth, *All American* because this country is all about progress and innovation – as an example: two ways in which the third largest distribution of semiconductors and a top-10 supplier of electronic components – All American – has used its patriotic image to outgrow most of its competition and to become an industry leader. Ninth, *prosperity* – because it encompasses the idea of more jobs, better careers, employment security, more take-home pay, a stronger economy and expanded opportunity. Tenth, *Spirituality* – because evocations that include this word are more inclusive and therefore more politically effective compared to generic references to *religion*, specific denominations or even *faith*. Eleventh, *financial security* – while financial freedom is more than most individuals can hope for at the moment, financial security is still attainable. Twelfth, *balanced approach* – just as maintaining an independence from partisanship and ideology wins you credibility with the community, so too arguing for a balanced approach to community, state or national problems resonates with listeners. And thirteenth, *a culture of* – by defining an issue or a cluster of issues as part of a metaphorical culture, you can lend it new weight and seriousness. Social issues have been supplanted by cultural issues which sound less threatening and judgmental. In the end, how these words are used and delivered is almost important as the words themselves because style is almost as important as substance and because the listener's interpretation makes all the difference in the world to his or her reception and processing of the message.

In the final analysis, messages need to be functional. Many messages today are delivered coarsely today. Words and expressions once considered vulgar have become part of common speech and their original meanings are often forgotten. Many feel that communication today has become overly harsh, discourteous and negative. Words are often sought out and used that

divide and demean. In such an environment, there is much to be gained by being upbeat, positive, optimistic and constructive in communicating. Negativity works at times, but a solid positive message triumphs. To be successful communicating in the 21st century, we need to become comfortable making the message resonate. As Roger Ailes, a media expert of the 20th century, puts it, we in public management need to understand that **WE ARE THE MESSAGE**.