Speak as Well as You Think

BY JOHN VAUTIER

What we say, how we say it, and what we’re doing when we say it combine to create great messages or messages that are long forgotten in the next moment. When business is yours to win or lose, first impressions are critical and you need to speak as well as you think. You need to focus on the four quadrants of communication, shown in figure 1.

Organization
Here are the key steps to consider when organizing your message:
• Who are my listeners and what do they want or need to hear from me?
• What do I want them to know?
• What do I want them to do?
• How will I influence them?
• What’s the formula for storytelling?
• How do I create transitions so the message flows logically?

Let’s look at each of these. Remember what the French philosopher Voltaire said: “The secret to being a bore is to tell everything.”

Who Are Your listeners?
Consider your audience. Who are they? How many people will you speak to? What time of day will you speak? What do you know about them? In what ways might they be predisposed to you or your topic?

If you’re familiar with them and you’re there to influence them, think about how they might have influenced you previously. Do they have a “story-telling” culture? Do they like statistics and facts? Do they often quote key thought leaders?

When you tailor your message to your listeners, you come across as customer-oriented, focused, connected, and aligned with them.

I once attended a dinner where the keynote speaker was Indianapolis Colts Coach Tony Dungy. Mr. Dungy didn’t sit at a head table; he sat with nine other folks, next to a 10-year-old boy and his father. When Tony was introduced at 7:30 p.m., he began by saying, “I sat next to Tommy Jones tonight. I want to share with all of you why Tommy is the most important person with us at dinner. The reason I say that is that I asked Tommy what time his mother was expecting him to be home from tonight’s banquet. Tommy said she wanted him home by 9 o’clock. I told Tommy that I’d be done and he’d be home before 9 o’clock when his mother is expecting him.”

The crowd enjoyed the embedded message that Mr. Dungy wasn’t going to bore them with a long speech, and he made Tommy and his dad feel very special that evening.

What Do I Want Them to Know and Do?
The following are the three key messages we deliver when we speak to a group and the reasons why we deliver them:
1. “Know This”—To inform, update, or educate
2. “Do This”—To recommend, propose, persuade, or influence
3. “Believe This”—To inspire

Stephen Covey says, “Start with the end in mind.” When you finish speaking to a group, what do you want your listeners to know, do, or believe? When you’ve answered that question, build your message so that when you’re done speaking, that’s where you finish.

Figure 2 illustrates a “Do This” format.

How Will I Influence Them?
Six forms of influence are used to move listeners to action. The first five form the acronym P-A-J-E-S. The sixth is “The Demonstration.” Let’s look at P-A-J-E-S:

P—Personal experience. A personal experience always is yours and it’s always delivered in story form. We all speak most passionately about a personal experience.

A—Analogy. Analogies are tough to get right, but when they’re right they’re effective. There must be a direct correlation, readily apparent to your listeners, or listeners will say, “I don’t get it.”

J—Judgment of an expert. You can quote thought leaders or company executives, industry gurus, or authors of leading business books. Those you quote should have credibility with your listeners.

E—Example. An example is a case study or someone else’s personal experience. It isn’t yours, but you tell it because it’s a great story and it...
promotes what you’re trying to accomplish.

S—Statistics or facts. We use statistics and facts all the time to drive home our points.

The Demonstration. Remember that winning courtroom demonstration where O.J. Simpson tried on the alleged murderer’s glove. “The glove doesn’t fit,” Johnnie Cochran declared. “If the glove doesn’t fit, you must acquit!” When a demonstration goes well, it is extremely compelling. When a demonstration doesn’t go well, it is extremely compelling. In other words, your message lives or dies by the demo.

Story Telling
Speakers often lament: “Oh, I don’t want to tell a story. It’s a business presentation.” But stories are synonymous with case studies, examples, personal experiences, even jokes. They all follow the same B-A-R pattern—Background, Action, Result.

Here’s an example:
Background. The year is 1974. The country is Bangladesh. There were 42 female bamboo stool weavers who needed money for raw materials. They were poor and had no collateral. They had been borrowing from a local moneylender at usurious interest rates.

Action. Muhammad Yunus loaned these women the equivalent of US$27. He required no collateral. His idea was simple. Given the chance, poor people could be just as creditworthy as the rich. He depended on peer pressure of the group to repay the loans.

Result. Yunus established a practice called microlending, and he founded Grameen Bank, which since 1974 has lent more than $5.7 billion to more than 6.6 million poor people around the world. Others have imitated microlending. Recently Yunus was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Any time you tell a story, tie it back to the point you’re using it to make. Many presenters expect their listeners to make the connection. Make it for them. Use words such as, “Now the reason I tell you this story is to...” and reaffirm your point.

Transitions
Transitions are how one part of the message hangs together with the next part of the message. When we transition well, listeners describe the message as organized, flowing well, hanging together, making sense, and logical.

How do we transition? If you’re using PowerPoint or notes, embed your transitions in the headers. When you say them you can say them in the declarative (“So let me explain transitions”) or the rhetorical (“How do we transition?”).

Summary of Organization
When I coached Ford Motor Co. President Red Poling in the late 1980s, he told me he gave just six speeches a year, which I thought was a small number. Poling explained that I was confusing the number of times he speaks with the number of talks he gives. “I have six talks,” he said. “They are a finance talk, a quality talk, a product development talk, and three others. Now I give each of those talks 20 to 30 times a year. What makes it easier for me is that each is formatted in a similar way. Eighty percent of the product development talk I give in Seattle tomorrow will be the same 80 percent I give in Cleveland next week. The other 20 percent are the Seattle details or the Cleveland details.”

Make this approach work for you. Find a format. You need a “Know This” format and a “Do This” format. Make it your own and the majority of the messages you deliver during your career will be accomplished far more easily than if every presentation is a unique-unto-itself message.

Delivery
When you deliver, marry your physical skills with your message. When it matters most, get up on your feet. If you’re only presenting to two or three clients, it’s overkill to stand to deliver your entire message. But do look for an opportunity to get up on your feet. When you are on your feet, you take an ordinary presentation and make it an event.

Every message can be delivered by speaking one thought to one person. It will work best if you organize your message in bullets, thoughts, or packages. Don’t write your message out in script or longhand. It makes it too hard to deliver. Speak or deliver thought to thought rather than word to word.

The three main adult learning styles are auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. When you tell me, show me a PowerPoint presentation and/or give me a handout, and have me, the client, interact with that handout, I will retain that information much longer.
Q & A / Facilitation

You work very hard to organize a logical, compelling presentation and it’s absolutely sensational, but the audience hammers you during Q & A, and that’s all anybody remembers.

Always meet the listener where the listener is. This means if the listener wants to ask a question in the middle of your presentation, take it when it’s asked. What’s important to the listener is what should be most important to you.

The ultimate credible answer to a client question is when the answer is stated up front first, and then you develop the answer. Here’s an example:

Question: “Isn’t the discipline of a Watch List an exact science?”

Direct Answer: “We believe it’s both a science and an art.”

Develop the Answer: “The quantitative analysis is the science. Applying decision making discipline to the analysis is the art and let me give you an example of that…..”

Here are three reasons you might rephrase a question:
1. To take the negatives out if it’s a hostile question.
2. To position the issue in preparation for your answer.
3. To buy thinking time before answering.

When you don’t know the answer, always acknowledge it. Say something like, “I don’t have that data with me…” and then you have two options:

- Option 1: “But I will get it for you and phone you this afternoon with it.”
- Option 2: “But if you’d give me a call following our meeting, I can get it for you.”

So how do I communicate these messages most effectively?

Physical

Want to win the business? Here’s what you need to do physically:

- Speak one thought to one person and pause between thoughts and people.
- Use your speaking voice.
- Inflect your key words and phrases.
- Balance your stance or sit up straight.
- Gesture above the waist and outside your body lines with hands open.
- Reset or drop your hands to your sides between thoughts.

Here’s why these skills are important: Malcolm Gladwell in his book Blink² cites a research study done by psychologist Nalini Ambadi, who studied how effectively a professor taught a college class. There were four groups:

1. The first group was shown three 10-second silent videotapes of the professor teaching the class.
2. The second group was shown three five-second silent videotapes of the professor teaching the class.
3. The third group was shown three two-second silent videotapes of the professor teaching the class.
4. The fourth group was the students who sat through that professor’s class for the entire semester.

Those who watched a silent two-second video clip of a teacher they never met reached conclusions about the teacher that were very similar to those who attended the teacher’s class all semester.

Conclusion

Whether you’re having a cup of coffee with your spouse or addressing a roomful of people you’ve never met, the way you communicate is critical to accomplishing your objectives. For the best results, follow the four quadrants of communication. First, do your homework and organize your message. Then deliver it to one person at a time. Handle questions nondefensively. Don’t forget to use your voice, gestures, and posture to physically project confidence and enthusiasm. Practice these techniques for just six weeks to make them your own. You—and your listeners—will notice a big improvement.

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Endnotes

1. See Stephen Covey (1989), The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (New York: Simon & Schuster); 95.