



Clear, Compelling, Correct

By

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I'm sharing some thoughts about training journalists and others who work in communication fields. While there are some differences among the various communication businesses, much of what we do is similar. That's why journalists do very well when they move into other areas of communication. Our recent series, *Is There Life After Journalism*, is a good example of that.

We've recently looked at The 4 Principles of Journalism, The 4 F's of Journalism, and The 3 R's of Writing. I'd like to look next at The 3 C's of Presentation.

Presentation Styles

The world of 'mass communications' you and I live in is made up of many different styles of 'presentation.' Our objective may be to 'inform' or 'influence,' or both.

My career in mass communications encompassed a wide variety of styles that included words, graphics, photos, video, sound, etc., to 'present' the message — mostly news and health information. I used radio, television, newspapers, websites, newsletters, email, podcasts, meetings, video reports, live video interviews, tabling events, and in-person discussions. Technology has been a partial driver during the last 55 years (remember overhead projectors?), but your own passion and creativity are probably the greatest drivers of getting your message to the public or your clients.

Here are three aspects of presentation that I've found helpful through the years. I hope they will help you as well.

Clear

Many years ago — at a television station far, far away — we chose a new station 'slogan' — **'The Clear Choice.'** We chose the phrase based on several reasons, one of which was the idea of our news stories being 'clear and easy to understand.' That, we believed, would make us the 'clear choice' for news viewers.

The idea of being 'clear' in communications simply means the message is easy to understand. That means it's not 'unclear, hard to understand, uncertain, confusing, etc.'

Clarity in messaging means it's 'clear and concise.' Whether your message is a news story, a news release, a commercial, a public relations announcement, or any other form of communication, be sure your 'presentation' is clear to the receiver. Message sent should be message received and understood.

You and your team (if you have a team) could spend hours, days, weeks, or even months preparing what you think is an amazing presentation, but if your audience is unclear about your message you've wasted your time and effort. Some of the best messaging is 'simple' — in that it is 'clear, concise, and understandable.'

Clear messaging means that every aspect is carefully reviewed for clarity. If anything is unclear, don't use it. Do whatever you need to do to make sure your audience understands the message clearly the first time they see it, read it, or hear it. You can go to the expense of setting up 'focus groups' if the project is big enough, but you can also use people in other parts of your office who are not involved in the project to give you their thoughts. You can even invite some neighbors and friends over to your house to enjoy refreshments, fellowship, and to watch your presentation. You may learn a lot that way, plus save some money.

Clarity of messaging can be tested. If someone sees, hears, or reads your presentation but can't tell you what they just saw, heard, or read, you will probably want to 'tweak' the messaging a little — or possibly a lot. Messaging is key to communications. Make sure it's clear and easy to understand.

Compelling

Communication messaging also needs to be 'compelling' (forceful, urgent, driving, convincing, demanding attention - *Merriam-Webster*). If your message doesn't compel someone to respond, why bother communicating it? Messaging needs to meet important 'needs' of the audience to be compelling. If your audience doesn't see how your message helps them, they won't pay attention to it.

You need to know your audience and what 'drives' them. Whether you are communicating a news story to the general public or you are making a presentation to members of a C-Suite, your message needs to hit a need and 'drive' your audience to do something about what they see and hear. What you say or write needs to 'matter' to your audience. If it doesn't matter to them, they'll switch channels or look at their computer or smart phone until they hear you say something that does 'matter' to them. If you are doing an in-person presentation, watch the people in the room. Are they looking at you or your 'messaging' with interest? Or are they checking their watch and text messages?

We used to call that 'grabbing eyeballs' in television news. We wanted people 'looking' at what we were showing them on the TV screen. How do you know whether people are looking at your newscasts? Get with some friends, family, or neighbors around news time and see what they do. Do they turn on the TV to watch news? Do they turn on your channel? If they do, watch to see what stories grab their attention. Do they turn away from your newscast to look at their phones or talk to other people? If so, which stories did they find 'not compelling.' After the newscast is finished ask the people if you could ask them a few questions about what they saw. Which stories do they remember? What information did they see/hear that they found helpful or met a 'felt need.'

If they turn on another station's newscast, don't be offended. This is an opportunity for you to learn about your competition. Listen to how people respond to the stories on another channel. What did they like about your competition? What did they dislike? Compare what they think about your competition to what they think about your station or message. What you learn may help you improve your messaging.

You can also do the same thing through ‘focus’ groups, but the people are being paid to watch your newscast. That’s also helpful, but not quite as ‘real’ as being with family and friends in their homes. Whichever method you choose to use, learn what ‘drives’ your audience — then make your messaging match that drive.

Other ways to find out what people view as important to them

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- Talk with people in other departments of your own station or office.
- Visit various stores in town and talk with people about their ‘felt needs.’
- Talk with people while you’re at a ballgame, at the park, at the zoo, wherever.
- Learn by listening. Ask good questions, then listen. Don’t argue with people about what they think is important to them — just listen.
- Take mental notes, then transfer those notes to paper when you get home or back to the office.

- You could do a research project through a local high school or college class. Teachers and professors often love that kind of stuff. It helps them give their students 'real-world' experience. You can offer some kind of payment or other reward that will show appreciation for the class effort.

If you want to spend 50-thousand or 100-thousand dollars to hire someone else to do research for you, fine. However, you can do good research for a lot less money.

Once you know what 'drives' your audience, then make your messaging 'compelling.'

Correct

I addressed some of this in the last newsletter about the '3 R's of Writing' when I wrote that communication should be 'right.' Messaging that is right or 'correct' is messaging that your audience will understand. Why? Because it's not filled with errors. That means everything from spelling to grammar to every technical aspect of the presentation. Accuracy is key to a 'correct' presentation. If you present something as true and your audience discovers it's not, what do you think they're going to do the next time you want to 'present' to them? You probably won't be invited back or they'll start watching another channel or they'll change the dial on their radio.

Speaking of technical presentations — remember back in school when your teacher or professor couldn't get some of the presentation equipment to work in class? What did you do while he or she was trying to find someone who could get the machines to work? Talk? Check your phone for text messages? Throw 'spit balls' at other students? (I guess that last one dates me a bit. I'm sure today's students don't do anything like that anymore.)

Names, titles, and locations need to be spelled correctly. Dates need to be correct. The logical flow of information needs to be correct. The presentation should have a strong beginning, middle, and end to be correct. Oh, and don't forget to give your audience an 'action' plan where possible. That means giving them something to 'do' with the information they've just received from you.

Depending on the type of communication and timeframe you have, do a 'trial run' of your presentation. Tell the people in the trial audience to be brutally honest with you. Ask them to imagine they are the audience you're trying to reach and think like that audience. It's not easy to receive brutally honest feedback, but hearing it from a 'trial run' could save you a lot of headaches and heartaches later. If their advice is good, use it. Change your presentation where necessary. If some of their advice is not good, be courteous and thank them for their feedback.

You're the professional. Use what you know will be clear, compelling, and correct. So, get out there and **PRESENT!**



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