

Let's Communicate--Your Audience Expects It

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Many of us in the Society are almost professionals at attending meetings or giving presentations. We attend technical sessions and many times appear on the program. We are mostly professionals in this business and represent companies, our own businesses, or an institution of government or university in areas of research, teaching, or regulatory.

Today, on this particular part of the program, we will discuss preparation and presentation of material for the various audiences we work with. We will consider a practical approach to preparation of our material. Anything we can do to cut down on preparation time can help immeasurably. We are busy people.

We will start with the three main factors of communication with which we are primarily concerned. These are:

YOU (the source)

YOUR MESSAGE

YOUR AUDIENCE

The big factor for you personally is the first, the YOU.

You are the source and you draw on other sources. But you, yourself, are the means whereby the message is delivered. Your knowledge, attitudes toward both audience and message, and your skills are big factors in the success of your presentation.

YOUR MESSAGE, the second factor, is the reason for your appearance before a group, or for that matter, the reason for preparation of a paper. Selecting the message which fits the particular event from your knowledge of and experience with the subject is your specific problem. This can be done and we will discuss this further.

YOUR AUDIENCE is the third factor in communications, and one which is too often overlooked. Your job as a program participant is to develop and present a message which fits that specific audience.

So, remember, you are only on once. You cannot hope to completely change your audience. Your job is to reinforce or extend the knowledge which your audience already has. Thus, you have a responsibility to cut your

material (and this is often difficult) to fit your audience, or to supply a missing link for them. Keep in mind that boredom and monotony are the two big factors which cause audience attention to sag. It is not fatigue, since fatigue is physically induced.

Therefore, develop a plan for your message. And then be sure that it fits your audience.

There are a number of plans, some quite sophisticated. I want to present one to you which I personally like and have found to be helpful, both for preparing presentations before audiences and for preparing written material. This plan is developed, as is most of the material I am presenting, from a wealth of research in the field of communications which was assembled and adapted for use by the now defunct National Project in Agricultural Communications at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich. Many agricultural college workers have been exposed to this material and have found it to be useful. I have taken the liberty of making my own adaptation of this material following training at NPAC short courses and have also based some of my reasoning on ideas which I have personally found helpful.

The plan I suggest to you is simple and will help you to automatically trim your message to fit your audience. It involves 6 simple points and these can be typed or written on 2 or 3 sheets of paper, leaving space between points for your message preparation. Points of the plan are as follows:

1. *What is your message?*

Write a single sentence which summarizes your message. You will find that this is simple to do and aids you in aiming your message as you would a rifle, rather than using the shotgun approach. (Our biggest problem is that we have so much material on a subject, a majority of which does not particularly fit either message or audience, that we find it hard to delete).

You will find that many times your single summary sentence will serve as a lead for your talk, the lead sentence in your news story, or the kick-off for your paper.

2. *Who is your audience?*

Analyze your audience. Write it down.

3. *What do you want your audience to do or to know?*

Seems simple, doesn't it? And it is. But too many program participants do not consider this vital question. So write down just what you expect of your audience at the particular time, place and event at which you are to appear. Be sure you write this out. It takes lots of thought, and perhaps more than a single sentence.

4. *Anticipate questions your audience might ask about your subject.*

Think through this point carefully. Then start listing the questions, one by one. Be sure you supply the answers to each in your message. Theoretically, if you do a good enough job here, you should not need a question and answer session when you finish speaking. Notice that I emphasized the theory factor.

5. *List the points you wish to include (no order).*

This is very important. As you go along and de-

velop the first 4 points in the form, keep a separate sheet of paper handy. As you think of a point, jot it down. Don't worry about order or importance of individual points at this juncture. Just write them down. Assume you will put them together later.

6. *List your points in order (consider the interest of your audience, your message, the importance of points).*

It's at this point that you make an outline, using the points from No. 5.

Now, we can assume that this 6-point outline seems simple enough. Yet there are still problem areas. Let us summarize them. First problem is that you are usually not selective enough. You have too much material and cannot or will not break it down. Here, you need to keep in mind that audiences can only handle so much information at one time anyway. To keep the interest of your audience, you need to cut material to fit them. Particularly, it is a good idea to reduce the number of slides you show to the minimum necessary to make your point.

Other problem areas are more simple, but still important. For example, we are often overly critical. We want to be perfectionists and this in itself is a block to getting the job of preparation done promptly and without upsetting our regular schedule of work. We are often overcautious and indecisive, this being related to the perfectionist factor.

Too often, we worry more about what our associates, or peers, will think than we do about the specific audience we are trying to serve. A closely associated problem is worrying more about oneself, than about the audience. All of these problems are the type which you can solve simply by employing a little mental exercise.

Just a word about legibility standards. Make sure you use lettering which is large enough for your audience to see. When you use charts or graphs, give your audience the necessary time to digest the message which they carry. This is a common fault, particularly if the audience is taking notes.

The following chart is standard and gives the letter size needed for a group with 20/20 vision. Since most groups will possess vision closer to 20/35, you probably need to consider that these letter sizes are the minimum standard:

Viewing Distance	Letter Size
8 feet	¼ inch
16 feet	½ inch
32 feet	1 inch
64 feet	1 inches
128 feet	4 inches

(Use a stroke width of letter 1/5 the height of lower case letters, and about 1/7 the height of upper case letters. Space between lines needs to be about 1½ times the height of the letters).

In summary, remember that your responsibility is to talk or write to that single person who represents your audience. Analyze that person and develop your message to fit him.