



Why You Need To Add Influence to Expertise

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It isn't the attorney who knows the most about the law who is always the most successful. Nor is it the insurance professional who best understands his products that makes the most sales. What about the financial planner who is an expert in her field? Sadly, expertise doesn't really matter—unless you can communicate it to others. Some of the very brightest professionals are less successful than they could be simply because they can't communicate their expertise.

In their book *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, Chip & Dan Heath introduce the concept of the “Curse of Knowledge.” They describe it as a situation where you know so much about something, you forget what it was like not to know it. My own take centers on a slightly different concept I call the “Curse of Expertise.” It results in fewer clients, lower productivity and less credibility. Here are five manifestations of the curse of expertise:

- 1. Experts believe facts speak for themselves.** They believe that if you just lay out the information, reasonable people will all come to the same conclusion. They sometimes don't realize facts need interpretation, context and explanation to be effective. Someone unversed in investing won't understand what a good return on investment is without some explanation of risk and performance. Doctors and other medical professionals sometimes report test results without giving lay people the context in which to understand them. Many times, facts have contradictory interpretations, so it's important to guide people to the interpretation you wish them to have.
- 2. Experts don't like the thought of selling ideas.** Many experts find the whole notion of selling and persuasion distasteful and unprofessional. But persuasion is at the very heart of healthy interpersonal relationships. Professionals who believe they have a product or service of genuine benefit to their prospects should feel a sense of obligation to persuade them to become clients. Persuasion is only a tool. Whether it's employed ethically depends on how a person uses it.
- 3. Experts sometimes focus on the message at the expense of the listeners.** The most successful communication focuses on the listener rather than the speaker or the message. Message-centered communication tends toward the very technical, contains lots of information and revolves around the activity of communication rather than the results you can achieve from it. It's important to consider the frame of reference, background and knowledge so you can adapt your message to specific listeners.

4. Experts often think you can beat someone into mental submission with the stick of logic. People are persuaded through different means including logic, emotion and credibility. Experts often focus heavily on data and statistics even though an individual may be more persuaded by emotion, narrative or case studies. Simply throwing more data at that individual won't be any more effective. If you're working with a hammer and it isn't doing the job you want, don't switch to a bigger hammer--use a different tool. The poet Samuel Butler wrote "*He that complies against his will is of the same opinion still.*" Piling logic on someone may gain you the appearance of agreement, but it probably won't get you buy-in.

5. Experts sometimes rely too much on their credentials and too little on providing proof of concept. Let's face facts—the designations bestowed by professional organizations may be recognition for hard-won achievements within the organization, but mean little to most potential clients. When you have to spend time explaining how prestigious and exclusive the designation is, you're engaged in obvious self-promotion. Demonstrate your experience and expertise through the use of examples, case studies and an understanding of client issues. Showing your expertise, rather than telling about it, will establish much greater believability.

In today's economy, expertise is just the price of admission. Success depends on your ability to communicate clearly and persuasively. Facts sometimes need explanation and ideas sometimes need to be sold. The best communication is listener-focused and savvy professionals understand that different things persuade different listeners. When you keep these points in mind, you'll be sure to add influence to your expertise.



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