



We Communicate More Than Information

©2009 Joseph Sommerville, Ph.D.

At the beginning of my seminars I ask participants to list some of the things they communicate. Inevitably, their responses include things such as “changes in the tax code, different investment products, how to choose a business structure, why disability insurance is necessary to protect income, new compliance rules and regulatory changes.” I then point out that all the things they’ve listed have something in common—they’re examples of information. It becomes the first thing they focus on because that’s what they *intend* to communicate. But we communicate much more than simply information. More careful attention to the larger aspects of the message will help ensure what we say is what people hear.

We communicate congruency between what we say and what people see. I recall attending a networking function where I met a woman attempting to drum up business for her professional services firm. After we were introduced, I asked her what she did. She proceeded to tell me about her business, about how she founded her business, about her business marketing strategy and about her great communication skills. She stopped only because the featured speaker was about to begin. He started his presentation by asking; “Do you know what the single most important thing in networking is?” The woman who’d been talking to me raised her hand and responded “Listening”! She lacked congruency between her actions and her words. We’ll also lack congruency when we say a concept is easy to understand, but have a difficult time explaining it or say a policy is straightforward but list out several exceptions.

We communicate an attitude towards those we communicate with. On a trip back to Houston from Singapore I had a stopover in Tokyo. Shortly after takeoff, I noticed the man sitting next to me periodically taking a scented letter out of his jacket and holding it to his nose. When he wasn’t busy enjoying the olfactory experience, he was reading the Bible and drinking miniatures of Jack Daniels. I hypothesized that the three events were somehow related, but I didn’t know if he was consoling himself over the separation from a significant other or was afraid of flying and couldn’t decide whether love, prayer or inebriation would produce the best results. After we reached cruising altitude, the flight attendant assigned to our section came to take drink orders. Of course the man sitting next to me ordered Jack Daniels. “No” was her reply. “I don’t have any liquor on this cart. You’ll have to wait until I can get to one that does.” About an hour later, I heard her corralling passengers in the main cabin. “We’re trying to serve the meal. It’s very difficult to get these service trays down the aisle when so many of you are moving around. If you want to eat, you need to sit down.” She was certainly conveying information, but it was the attitude that spoke loudest. What attitude comes through when you present?

We communicate professionalism. Part of being professional involves keeping your cool under taxing conditions. Another part involves how people see us treat others. In my search for a new health insurance policy, I phoned some area agents to see what they had to offer. At one office, the agent picked up the phone after the fifth ring, asked how he could help, listened to my brief reply, then said; “Let me put you on hold while I get rid of this guy on the other line.” Even though his policy was competitive, I didn’t give him my business because I thought eventually, I would simply become the “guy on the other line.”

We communicate these aspects of our professional lives through our tone of voice, our word choices and our actions. They’re part of the larger message we send. Experts must be careful that the information they’re trying to communicate doesn’t become eclipsed by the other aspects people see and hear.



Joe Sommerville shows professional services firms how to increase visibility, enhance credibility and close more business. Download the first chapter of RainMaking Presentations: How to Grow Your Business by Leveraging Your Expertise at www.RainMakingPresentations.com.