

# REACHING THE RIGHT AUDIENCE

BY JOHN BALDONI



A leader can use words to accomplish much. Words by themselves are bits of information. Words backed by the leader's character, conviction, and personal example have the power to communicate: to inform, exhort, cheer, heal, or inspire. If words are to have such power, however, they must be shaped into clear and coherent messages; these messages are designed to achieve two aims: one, build trust; two, achieve results. Much care and consideration must go into shaping the message.

## DELIVERING THE MESSAGE

Content and delivery of the leadership message is dependent upon audience need and expectation. Just as advertisers target their messages to specific

demographic groups, e.g. young males 18-24 or women 21-48, leaders can do the same to specific interest groups, e.g. managers, employees, customers, suppliers. The heart of the message will remain consistent, but the point of view may differ. For example, a message to employees about a new product launch will describe the product as well as the support the employees must deliver to the customers. A product launch message to a customer will concentrate on features and benefits and describe the support the customer will receive.

## In shaping the message, consider these points:

**Select the key influencers.** Consider whom you want to reach first – those who can influence your message in a positive way. It may be appropriate to invite key members of the media for a preview of a new product, or an inside look at an organizational initiative. This technique is tried and true within public affairs circles as a means of creating buzz and excitement. At the same time, consider those who can adversely affect your message. It is appropriate to give them inside briefing, too, so that you can address any potential negatives and defuse them prior to general release of the message.

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**Target the message.** Adjust the content of the message to the audience you wish to reach. An all-employee message may be appropriate for all levels of the organization and so everyone will receive the same content. It is often a good idea, however, to alert senior management of the message and even send them a pre-release message along with suggestions about what kind of reaction to expect from their people when the message is delivered. In this way, you gain buy-in of the leadership message and create a greater sense of shared destiny. All of us, no matter who we are, appreciate inside information because it makes us feel special and more in the know.

**Reiteration is good.** People need to hear the message over and over again – once is not enough. Just as you repeat messages with media, you repeat messages to the same audiences. You can tweak the content to keep it fresh, but it is essential for the leader to repeat his core themes more than once. Repetition does two things: one, it increases the likelihood of retention; two, it demonstrates importance. Most importantly, reiteration of a message underscores a leader's consistency, which leads directly to credibility.

**Keep the big picture in mind.** Targeting and audience selection are important but it is important to keep the whole story in front of you. It is essential to make certain that everyone is getting the same big picture message. The leader must ask herself periodically if key constituents have the information they need to do their jobs and have confidence in the leadership of the organization. Everyone does not need – nor do they want – to know “everything about everything.” But everyone does need to feel the communication they are receiving is accurate, honest and truthful. If it is helping to strengthen the bond of trust between leader and follower as well as help drive results, then the communications is appropriate.

## MAKING THE MESSAGE RESONATE

When it comes to ensuring that a message is seen and heard by the right people, leaders can learn from public relations professionals. In his book, *Feeding the Media Beast*, author Mark Mathis identifies a number of factors that individuals or organizations seeking publicity employ to get noticed by the media. Three salient elements to raising awareness are relevant to leadership communications: difference, emotion, and simplicity.<sup>1</sup> Let's take them one by one.

**Difference.** Leaders are about making a difference. We look to our leaders to give us the guidance to take us to places where we have not yet gone. Therefore, leaders need to link their communications to their difference. A leader's difference is both metaphorical and literal. The metaphorical difference relates to the difference he will bring to an organization: how he will make changes to make things better for the stakeholders. Colin Powell is a master at delivering a message that explicates a policy and demonstrates the benefits. The second difference is literal. The leader must look to make his messages



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different, (e.g. “fresh.”)<sup>2</sup> The freshness may emerge from using new and different words or stories to underscore key points as well as keeping it new and different with varying forms of delivery.

**Emotion.** All of us are bombarded by messages, both spontaneous and recorded, all day long. Most of the time all of the words and sounds run together. We stop in our tracks, however, when we sense emotion, or better, passion. Governor Mark Schweitzer of Pennsylvania demonstrated passion as he addressed the media hour after hour during the Somerset mine disaster in the summer of 2002. When the miners were found alive and rescued his passion turned to getting to the route cause of the disaster and how it might be prevented. Passion need not be oratory. Mother Teresa was a quiet unassuming speaker, but her words echoed her passion for her mission of providing for the neglected poor.

**Simplicity.** People have much on their plate. A leader needs to shape his message in a way that is straightforward and simple to make it accessible. Remember, the KISS slogan – (Keep It Simple, Stupid.) Bill Clinton’s first presidential election campaign adapted this phrase to “It’s the Economy, Stupid” to remind everyone on the staff what the real issue was; it worked and Clinton defeated an incumbent president. [Do not think sloganeering is beneath you. It simply gives people a handle to grab a message and begin to understand it.]

Communication is the best way a leader can convey who she is as a person. By developing the right message for the right moment, the leader can do more than inform, but persuade others of the reasons why. This creates a foundation of trust, upon which all leadership depends. With honest and genuine communications, leaders can articulate their vision and bring along others to share in journey.

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**Sources:**

1. Mark Mathis, *Feeding the Media Beast: An Easy Recipe for Great Publicity*, West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2002 pp. 29-87
2. Eric Felten Books, “How to Be Your Own PR Flack,” *Wall Street Journal*, 8/02/02 [A review of *Feeding the Media Beast*]