

Advisor

The Newsletter of Effective Communication

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With apologies to Commodore Perry
**We Have Met the Audience
and They Are Ours**



It is not uncommon for the Ammerman office to get a "rush order." Some executive somewhere has agreed to an interview with CNN, *The Wall Street Journal* or a trade publication and wants to be prepped to face that one reporter with knowledge and confidence. But put that same person in front of 5,000 employees and he/she will decide to just wing it. Wrong. So wrong.

Here in the post-dot.com/Enron world, internal audiences can be the toughest sell of all, yet the need to win their trust and get their buy-in is often ignored. Smart managers understand that **a message ill delivered at home will have little luck in the larger arena** of clients, industry analysts and shareholders, let alone in the competition-driven news media.

Harsh economic reality often means delivery of bad news to the (loyal?) troops. Even good or neutral news is viewed suspiciously, especially if communication has been unclear or less than forthright in the past. Cuts in benefits, layoffs, realignments that create stress - these announcements are left to HR to figure out because nobody wants to be the bearer of bad news. Even if your HR department is top-notch and has had thorough communications training, there are many situations where other managers *must* be a point of contact.

Yes, crummy communicators get to top positions for many reasons, sometimes even good reasons. We have seen these awful speakers read notes stiffly or ad lib awfully, fumbling and flailing and ultimately failing. Others aren't so damaging, just ineffective. They leave listeners baffled, miss chances to inspire and come across dull when it is time to shine.

Some people are mediocre messengers because they don't make an effort to be good. Some are bad because they speak in terms only their peers understand.

continued

Quick Bites

**Ads Above
Ads Below**

Google has made it possible for everyone in the world to get an aerial view of the world through satellite images. As a number of tech and ad blogs have recently pointed out, some Target stores have their logo painted on the roof. Is the retailer simply appealing to low-flying planes and news choppers, or perhaps have the potential billions of eyes on Google maps stimulated this logo location? Hard to say, but clearly, we are reaching even higher frontiers in the race for the public's attention. But just think, you could start today and be the first in your city to open a roof-decorating business.

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Others admit they aren't good speakers and thus feel free to quit trying. What all these people fail to acknowledge is that these communication skills can be learned. *We see huge improvements take place in a single day!*

Lest we let one newsletter go by without saying it, here is it; audiences today are savvy, both outside **and inside** your company. Trotting out clichés and reading bullet points from slides will not cut it. Clunky video and webcast presentations may not be worth the cost of electricity. **Treating associates with less care and concern than the other stakeholders is a mistake.**

Tell the truth now – can everyone at your work who needs to, make a *useful* presentation for associates? Do you have a strategy for delivering confusing, stressful or just plain bad news? Can you make complicated messages clear? Can your techies and accountants talk to each other and be understood? Do your internal telecasts or webcasts look smart, or do they resemble public-access shows, only less creative?

An organization that cannot communicate internally turns its back on itself. Or as the old cartoon character Pogo said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

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Mind the Gap

The tragic accident at the Sago Mine in West Virginia has served as an opportunity for people to reexamine their own communications plans. While International Coal Group executives did a laudable job communicating information during the initial phases of the crisis, control of the communications process went horribly awry after incorrect information about the fate of the trapped miners went unchallenged by company officials. This worst-case scenario in crisis communications illustrates how easily things can get out of control in today's lightning-fast media environment. Below are answers to some of the questions raised by this disaster and the breakdown in communications. This can serve as a guide for asking questions about your preparedness.

Q. When there was confusion about the fate of the miners, what could ICG executives have told reporters?

A. The issue here illustrates a key gap in strategy - having people prepared to credibly refute incorrect information - or information that is not verified. In this instance, the hesitation essentially destroyed the goodwill company officials had developed during the first few days of the crisis through their tireless efforts to provide updated information to the public. Company officials were concerned about the accuracy of the information about the miners being found alive, but were

continued

Could You Please Not Repeat That?

Any time is a good time to check in with Lake Superior State University, where “they pass the saving on to you!” No, not really, but they readily share and solicit entries for their annual list of [Banished Words](#), a compilation of words and phrases banished from the Queen's English for “misuse, overuse and general uselessness.” Begun 30 years ago, this small school in Michigan's Upper Peninsula has kept tongue in cheek while fielding media inquiries from around the world. Words banished from past years include *bling* and *metrosexual* from 2004, *frontal nudity* (as opposed to backal nudity?) in 1984, and in a prescient move, banned the phrase *social security* in 1979 because social security is neither social nor secure. Your humble newsletter editor once interviewed the list's originator, Bill Rabe, and it should be noted that Rabe said that words should not just be banished, they should be banish-ed (three syllables) simply because the regal pomposity of that pronunciation tickled his funny bone.

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unsure what information was in fact accurate. Their energies were directed in trying to verify information - not raising questions about the information that everyone wanted to believe was true. In retrospect, what could have been done was an immediate statement expressing concern about the accuracy of the information. This would have helped stem the wave of media reports that essentially gave credibility to the incorrect information. It's important to understand that the company's silence allowed this to continue without challenge. This may have been a difficult position for executives since they wanted to communicate only fact but did not have any different information to refute what was being said. This is a situation all communicators should be prepared to adeptly manage in today's lightning-fast media world.

Q. In analyzing the communications breakdown at Sago, some have pointed out that the company had new owners and couldn't be expected to perform as a team. Does that explain things?

A. It does not. You must have people prepared at all levels to communicate to the different critical audiences during an emergency, or during management of a sensitive business issue. In addition, all employees must be sensitive to how information should be managed during an incident - especially information that needs to be relayed to family members. Ensure that your leaders are well trained and ready for a variety of challenges and opportunities. Today, they don't get a second chance when the chips are down.

Q. How about communication with the miners' families waiting for word in the church?

A. This is the most sensitive part of the process and perhaps the biggest gap that surfaced during the mine crisis. Company officials left that to the local clergy when it was completely their (the owners) responsibility. Assumptions are commonly made about how an organization should handle family members of those injured or killed.

We work with airlines and others on Human Services Response, and the misinformation we saw at Sago is what we call a "second assault." The families had to bear the tragedy twice. A best practice is to have plans established and people trained for this effort in advance of a situation.

Q. Is taking care of workers and especially their families' emotional needs really an employer's job?

A. To do otherwise invites a landslide of other problems.

Q. Is that a function of the HR department?

A. It can be, but most companies assume HR has it covered without ever making sure that they do, although most HR people have not been trained for that. That, too, is a serious gap in the plan. But companies frequently fill the gap with EAPs (Employee Assistance Programs) that are completely outsourced and ineffective. Does it really show compassion for people at a tragic time to hand them an 800 number? Furthermore, the public judges companies by how they are perceived to treat their employees.

Q. Who should handle crisis communications - the company, its PR firm, a specialized crisis communications consultant or a combination?

A. Of course, a combination is the best alternative; but, in most cases, we believe

We are not making this up

The Associated Press
BANGKOK, Thailand,
Nov. 21, 2005

(AP) Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said Sunday he will not answer reporters' questions until next year because the alignment of the planets is not in his favor.

"Right now Mercury ... is in a corner perfectly aligned with my star. Mercury is no good, so if it's not good, I am going to request not to speak. I'll just wait until next year to talk," Thaksin told reporters after returning to Bangkok from a trip to South Korea and China. He added that Mercury moves slowly and will not steer clear of his star until next year.

Certainly more creative than "No comment."

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the one who presents the company's face to the public should be the highest-ranking person who is capable of doing it well. Research shows that people believe that when the PR firm or attorney is sent out to talk to the media, the facts are being spun. They want to know why high-ranking individuals are not visible and accountable. They are suspicious.

Q. How many trained people should a company have?

A. There needs to be at least one designated spokesperson per site who can handle the basics or even just delay properly until backup from headquarters gets there. And then there is the issue of the need to sensitize everyone. Part of the problem at Sago Mine was that people who overheard bits of a phone conversation were spreading around information. Controlling rumors and access to the site are critical components of crisis management from the first minute. That means that every employee plays a part, especially receptionists and security guards - the front-line people when it comes to outside contact. Every employee needs to be included in the plan and needs to understand his or her role, even if it is only refusing to gossip or speculate.

Q. Ammerman creates and implements crisis communications drills for clients. Since every crisis is unique, how useful is that really?

A. Our clients who drill regularly say it is amazing how much you can learn in just one day. You get an insight into the functionality of the plan, the abilities of the crisis team and most importantly - where the gaps are. And because personnel changes and many key people may travel, these drills really should be done at least yearly. An untested crisis plan is worth the binder it sits in, but not much more.

Special Seminar

**Emergency Response Planning Workshop
for Petrochemical Industries
April 19-20, Houston**

Preparing your response to an emergency has never been tougher; the threats are so varied. We have put together a special two-day **Emergency Response Planning Workshop** April 19 & 20 in Houston to help people in the petrochemical industry address three key areas that need to be carefully examined in the emergency planning process: Human Services Response, Communications Challenges and Technology for Emergency Operations.

This session is recommended for Human Resources, Environmental Health and Safety, Training and Development, Compliance and Risk Management and Corporate Communications professionals.

To sign up for this important seminar or get more detailed information, contact our office at 1-800-866-2026.

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2006

**Ammerman
Individual
Enrollment
Training Dates**

**Effective Media
Communications**

April 28
May 9
June 13
July 18
August 15
September 19
October 12
November 7
December 5

Effective Presentations

June 14
September 20

Advanced Media Skills

April 26-27
November 9-10

EMC Refresher

September 21

**Effective Media
Communications for
Marketing Professionals**

April 25
November 8

The above schedule lists Ammerman individual, public workshops. For available dates for private (buy-out) training dates, please contact The Ammerman Experience at 1.800.866.2026.

The Ammerman Experience public workshops are scheduled on a first-come, first-served basis, and are available to a limited number of attendees to ensure maximum personalized attention. To register for a course, contact our office at 1.800.866.2026.

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Our firm is a pioneer in understanding the link between effective communication and professional success. What we've learned and what we teach can improve your performance . . . and that of others in your organization.

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