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TITLE IT'S NOT HYPE, IT'S COMMUNICATION
Using Public Relations Techniques to Improve your Technical
Messages

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It's Not Hype,

It's Communication:

Using public relations techniques to improve your technical messages

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Abstract

Technical communicators are concerned that if they employ public relations (PR) techniques, they somehow compromise their work. They believe PR equates with hype. However, to those of us in the field, PR means simply how people relate. Knowing PR techniques gives one a better understanding of human factors and interactions; using the techniques improves the chances for communication to occur. If technical communicators are willing to learn PR techniques, they will gain strong tools to use to strengthen their messages.

Introduction

If you were a scientist, you would not want to draw any conclusions for your audience. You would say the data alone would lead everyone to the "right" summation. On the other hand, if you were an advertiser, the communication mission would be to ensure that your message became the audience's conclusion—

regardless of the data.

However, you are neither scientist nor advertiser. As a technical communicator, you fall in between the extremes: you are not about to ignore the facts, but you suspect that a cold recitation of the data often results in garbled messages. How can you improve your communication success rate? Use public relations techniques.

Definition of PR

Detractors seem to be able to define the art of public relations very quickly and succinctly, labeling PR as fluff, hype—or, at worst, outright lying. However, those of us in the field have been laboring over a definition for years. One definition I heard years ago remained with me because it comes closest to my belief: public relations is *the attempt to create opportunities or solve problems by applying knowledge and understanding of human nature, ideally in a way that lets people have a voice in decisions that affect their lives.*

A more simple working definition might be that PR means how **People Relate**. In other words, a PR practitioner must know human nature. We must understand attitudes and beliefs—why people have certain attitudes and how strong these attitudes are. If PR specialists know the attitudes of the various publics, they can tailor communications accordingly and thus be more effective in producing the understanding needed.

An obvious example I've encountered frequently as a writer at Los Alamos National Laboratory is communicating research for scientists in the field compared to communicating that same research for the military group funding the effort. Of course I couldn't write the same way for those two audiences. If I did, it certainly wouldn't allow people to *have a voice in decisions that affect their lives* because they wouldn't have had the same understanding of the research. Yet, how often have you used just one communication and sent it to such diverse groups?

Reasons to Use PR Techniques

To make your communication audience-specific is undoubtedly the most important reason for incorporating PR techniques. I hope you agree that we can no longer afford the luxury of assuming

audiences are homogeneous and able to arrive at the same conclusions after reading or hearing our message. (We will discuss techniques for profiling audiences later in this paper.)

But you might question the need to go much farther in incorporating an understanding of human nature into your communications. You are a good writer, writing on subjects that are important to you, your company, and, you think, to your audiences. Yet, all of us know that in today's world our audiences are in "information overload." Like computers with our floppy disks, audiences reject our communications because there's no room left for any more data. And information continues to bombard our audiences at a dizzying rate.

Moreover, we have to be aware that even if our communications successfully clear the first big hurdle of being read or heard, people only remember 20% of what they are told, 30% of what they see, and 50% of what they see and hear (compared with 70% of what they say and 90% of what they do). Frankly, there are too many times when there is no way for us to use the hands-on approach—we have to rely on the written or spoken word.

Thus, the art of communication becomes more and more a challenge. If we have technical messages that we must get across to our audiences, we had better use every technique we know.

Inform or Persuade

Some technical communicators are leery about persuading their audiences. They believe they should just inform—you know, get the facts out there and let the audience do what it wants with the information. Unfortunately, if we just inform, our audiences are left hanging. They want an answer to their "so what" question. So what does all this information have to do with them? If you don't provide that answer, the audiences will. And they may answer in the opposite. The answer you give to the "so what" question can be subtle or even unstated, but you must address it as you write. My persuasive "so what" answer in this paper is obvious and stated in the introduction—here are PR techniques to use *so that you can improve your communication success rate*. Let's look at examples of what some "so what" answers might be in a communication on the development of three-dimensional

hydrocodes:...so that you can choose the right code for your company...so that you can decide whether or not to continue funding the research...so that you can make use of the developments in your own research. You can easily see that defining the "so what" answer determines how you write the communication.

Persuasive writing can range from simply defining the "so what" question for your audience to actually selling. Only you will be able to determine each time what amount of persuasion is needed. But you will need to use it.

Decision-Making Process

However, in order to learn more about persuading audiences, we need to understand how people make decisions. Making decisions involves a five-step process. First comes the information phase. During this phase our audience takes its beginning step by becoming aware. Hopefully, our communication then generates enough curiosity on the part of our audience to lead to the second step—interest. During this step, the audience actively seeks information. The next step is the evaluative one. Now our audience is evaluating the information we have presented. The fourth step involves a social trial because most people only make decisions after checking them out with their peers. The final step is the actual decision making.

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Persuasive Writing

Now how do we write with persuasion? Let's explore the four hallmarks of persuasive messages:

- **Familiarity**
Audiences buy ideas mainly from communicators they trust. And since they often can't test the trustworthiness of the sources themselves, audiences rely on "trustees" who endorse ideas for them. If you want to persuade your audience, use trustees to carry your message.
- **Identification**
Audiences embrace messages when they can see their own hopes, dreams, and ambitions in them.

- **Clarity**
Audiences believe messages that are clear on the first reading, not those needing several interpretations. Make it easy for the target to get the message by avoiding jargon, passive verbs, and third degree language. Also try to write subject/verb/object 90% of the time (most writers do o/v/s). And use the passive voice and "to be" verbs only 10% or less of the time.
- **Action**
Audiences do not buy ideas separated from action—either action already taken or about to be taken by the sponsor, or action that the audience can itself take. So ask for what you want. Draw conclusions for your audience. Use directive verbs.

Profile Your Audience

At the same time remembering how our audiences decide and how to write more persuasively for them, we now look at defining audiences. One excellent way of profiling audiences is to ask the following three questions:

1. What do audiences know?
2. How do audiences feel?
3. What do audiences need?

1. What do audiences know? We need to answer that question along with the more specific questions: How did they get that knowledge? What are their respected sources? What standards do they use to judge products or services like yours? Do they have enough technical knowledge? Do they need stories, examples, or visual aids to get the point?

2. How do audiences feel? How do they feel about the topic, you, your organization? Are their attitudes hard or soft? Do their attitudes come from experience, hearsay, or genes? What is their agenda for this topic? Do you share a common agenda?

3. What do audiences need? Do they need information about how to judge your service or product? Do they need feature or benefit messages? How do you rank against the competition in their minds? How will their lives be different if they accept your

message? Make your conclusions answer "so what" for each audience.

Get the Message Across

In each of our communications, first we must profile our audience, then define the message for that specific audience, and, finally, write as persuasively as needed to ensure that the message is received by our audience.

Although of lesser importance to the techniques listed above, our communications also need to be more readable, "watchable," and "listenable."

Make Communications Readable

One good way to make communications readable is to write at an acceptable level for your audience. And I urge you to lean more toward the comfort level rather than the reading level of your audience. The reading level tells you how many years of schooling someone needs to easily read and understand what you write. The comfort level indicates the level readers prefer—this is usually two or three grades below the reading level.

Two factors that affect reading ease are the average length of a sentence and the number of words of three or more syllables. There are several formulas you can use to determine the reading level of what you write. This one, which is easy to use, is called the Gunning Fog Index.

Determine Reading Level

- Step 1: Count a sample of about 100 words. Keep counting until you get to the end of a complete sentence.
- Step 2: Count the number of sentences in your sample. Divide the number of sentences into the number of words to get the average sentence length.

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- Step 3: Count all the words that contain three or more syllables. Underline each one but don't count proper nouns, verbs that have been made into three syllables because of the addition of *ed* or *es*, or words of three or more syllables

that are combinations of easy words.

Step 4: Figure the percentage of words of three or more syllables in the sample by dividing the number of words in the sample into the number of words of three or more syllables.

Step 5: Add the average sentence length number and the number or percentage you got for words of three or more syllables. Multiply that sum times four. The result is the reading or grade level for that piece of prose.

Remember that the Gunning Fog Index is not a formula for writing—it predicts reading ease only. In other words, readers will wade through the foggiest prose if really motivated. But without that motivation, even college-educated readers will resist prose with a Fog Index above 12.

Readability also deals with how things look on the page. Factors affecting readability include typography, amount of white space on the page, use of copy-breaking elements such as subheads, blurbs, initial letters, photos, illustrations, etc., and the color of paper and the ink.

Personalize—dramatize—compare: these are more techniques to use that will make your communication more readable. Just as the popular press choose Ryan White to personalize the horrors of AIDs, we can use individual scientists (either real or fiction) to give life to an account of advances in computations. We can dramatize the plight of public utility companies confronting the lack of evidence of harm done by electromagnetic fields. In other words, because these topics are technical does not mean they are without humanity. Add the humanity and you will add life to your writing.

Make Communications "Watchable" and "Listenable"

Besides making your communication more readable, make it easier to watch or listen to. That is, if you are producing videoscripts, downplay the words. First write the action, then write the dialogue. Use fewer talking heads, add more action and dramatization. To make your communication more "listenable," remember to keep the focus on the speaker by using simpler visual aids and ones that reinforce the message.

Conclusion

The techniques discussed in this paper include some of the basics, but there is still a wealth of PR skills for you to discover. Moreover, the area of PR research is expanding daily and all of us must stay informed. (An excellent source for the latest research is the IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication publication.) Yet, knowing these techniques is only the start in meeting the challenge of technical communications. Applying these techniques in each of your communications is your turning point.