

How to truly match your message to your audience

Guest Commentary by Roger HB Davies

Everybody knows the communication mantra: Adjust your message to your audience!

Great in theory, but how to apply?

That's exactly what we at M& D were wondering some 20 years ago, when we asked the questions: How do people actually communicate? How do they process information? How do they, in fact, *think*?

We wondered if there was a connection between these communications questions and our studies in left- and right-brain research? Could our findings in some way be applied to the broad field of communication-skills development?

We organized a series of focus groups and workshops to find out! This process resulted in the development of communications assessment tool in which we asked participants a series of communications-related questions to try and assess whether they were a right- or left-brained communicator.

In retrospect, this was a naïve rather simplistic notion. What we quickly (and predictably) discovered was that the act of communication is clearly a *whole-brained* activity - *everybody* can handle *both* left- and right-brained communication.

Even more significantly - we discovered that people communicate in *three* distinct ways, not *two*.

In fact, our research showed the following:

1. A formal structure exists for all communication.
2. This structure allows us all to use three distinct communication styles.
3. All three styles are needed for perfect communication.
4. 80% of us prefer one style, although we use all three styles.
5. The three styles broadly involve: analytical, interactive and visual communication.

Moreover, and critically, our research showed that what typically happens in a situation is that an expert in one style tries to communicate in that *same* style to everyone else - often with dismal results.

It 's rather like being challenged to a game of ping-pong (representing speed) and turning up at the game carrying a tennis racket (representing sociability)! Clearly, you don't understand each other and you're not going to have much of a game.

It therefore follows that you need to understand all three communication styles well so that you can shift styles (when needed) to match the message to the audience (and improve your game!)

The three key communication styles (along with their traits) are:

1. **Analytical.** The most widely understood style, and probably the most obvious. People with this style prefer: the written word, numbers, logic, facts, and details. They are at their best one-on-one.
2. **Interactivity.** The style that represents people skills. People with this preferred style love the communication process. They like to be involved in dialogue, seeking input from all, probing towards consensus. They tend to prefer the spoken word, and value evidence that everyone buys into a given decision. They are at their best in HR and consensus-building/teambuilding roles.
3. **Visual.** A rapidly growing communication style in the workplace, and one that is not widely understood. Above all, people with this as a preferred style communicate fast! Indeed speed is the critical factor. Speed of thought. Speed of decision making. They talk fast, need variety, action, change. They respond favorably to color. They are at their best where gifted conversational skills are in demand.

Once you understand the key aspects of these styles, this will profoundly affect how you adjust your message to an audience. Since we all use three styles of communication, you need to accommodate all three in *presenting* your message. Then, you adjust your message to reflect their bias.

In other words, if your audience is strongly **analytical**, you know that you will need to do the following:

- Provide a key part of your message in writing.
- Provide evidence of facts details and proof.
- Insert some kind of structure into your message, i.e., numbers, headings.
- Respect the audience's need to reflect on the details, i.e., give them time to absorb all the details and understand fully the nature of the issue.

If your audience is strongly **visual**, approach with the following bias:

- Deliver message quickly and verbally.
- Be prepared for discussion on the topic.
- Prepare support material that is brief, colorful, and visual and with as few words as possible.
- Get to the point! Set your message up so your audience can absorb the information fast!

If your audience is strongly **interactive**, approach them as follows:

- Make it clear that you are inviting their input, if possible.
- Ensure they are treated as equal partners in the dialogue.
- Understand that consensus is a real priority in their mind.
- Allow extra time so all stake holders can be involved.

While all three styles are needed (and valued), if you are in doubt about the communication preference of your audience– get to the point! People haven't got time these days on how to decipher your message!

Curious about your own communication-style preference? Visit www.mdctraining.ca where you can complete your own self-assessment.

Roger HB Davies is CEO of Toronto based communication consultants McLuhan and Davies. You can read more about the above topic in the recently released book: PAWTALK! – Achieving Quick, Clear, Honest and Persuasive Communications.