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The Art of Deep Conversation

Everything we do in the free and community paper industry involves communication. Sales managers and publishers need to communicate their goals, objectives and expectations to their staffs. Sales people need to communicate the value of advertising in their publication to their prospects and customers. Once we make a sale we need to create an ad that communicates the benefits of patronizing our advertiser's business to our paper's readers. The definition of "communication" in the dictionary is "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behavior." In the real world, communication is much more difficult than this simple definition implies. The problem is that no two brains are exactly alike. We all have different backgrounds and different interests. The challenge of clear communication has its roots in the dictionary definition above; because we are so different it is a great challenge to find "common" symbols, signs and behaviors. The more I observe people interacting with one another, the more I agree with George Bernard Shaw's observation, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." True communication requires transplanting an idea or a belief from one human brain to another. When you transplant a flower in your garden you need to be sure it is planted properly if it is to thrive and grow. The same is true of planting an idea in another person's mind, it must be planted properly if it is to grow and bear fruit. Here are some thoughts on properly planting, i.e. communicating, ideas.

Assumptions and presumptions

We forget that people, even people who grew up in our own neighborhood, or even in our own family, are quite different from us. You can see this in the different personalities of close siblings or even twins. We have an ego centric tendency to think we are the model for the human race, that others share our knowledge of the world and our attitudes. The two biggest road blocks to true communication are assumptions and presumptions. For example, an English professor uses an anecdote from Hamlet to make a point assuming that "everyone" is familiar with Shakespeare's most famous play. A sales manager tells a rep to create an Excel spreadsheet showing his/her projected sales for the month on the presumption that the rep is familiar with the program. This is like the story of the British officer who asked for volunteers from a Gurkha regiment to jump out of an airplane behind enemy lines. The officer was surprised when only a few men stepped forward, because the regiment recruited from villagers from Northern India was known for its bravery. Just then the Gurkha sergeant told the officer, "Perhaps you should explain parachutes to them."

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The key to crystal clear communications is to make no assumptions about what the person we are talking to knows. I was in the field with a sales rep who was trying to sell a prospect on why our mailed publication was better than a competing daily newspaper. He told the business owner, “Our publication is delivered through the U.S. Mail.” The prospect nodded and said, “that’s interesting.” The rep was sure he had made the sale, but the customer wasn’t convinced. I jumped in and added, “Because we are direct mailed, we reach virtually every home in the area, five times as many homes as the newspaper. Do you think your ad would work better if you reached five times as many potential customers?” Once I had explained the advantage we offered, the customer became much more engaged and eventually bought an ad. Managers commit the same sin. They assume that a rep who is underperforming is simply not working hard enough. They assume that because they know how to conduct a sales call, that everyone on their team does as well. Often the case is that a rep doesn’t know how to open a call, close etc. The key is not to presume that you know what the problem is before you observe the rep’s behavior. We have to remember that people’s egos stop them from admitting that they don’t understand what you are talking about. They will smile and nod while thinking, “I can’t let this guy know I don’t have a clue what he’s getting at.” Research indicates that this creates a stressful internal conflict, which puts the prospect in a negative frame of mind virtually ensuring that they will reject your proposal.

As indicated above, before true communication can occur, the parties involved need to find common ground. Since we are trying to get the other person to understand what we are trying to say, the burden of doing this rests squarely on our shoulders. We must get inside the other person’s mind and poke around until we find something we recognize. Since only Mr. Spock could do the “Vulcan Mind Meld,” our only option is to ask questions and closely listen to the answers. Many sales people use questions more as a technique to move the sales call along, rather than as a communications tool. They assume that they know all about the customer’s business and presume to know the answers before asking the questions. They don’t listen closely to the prospect’s answers and customers often read this as a lack of genuine concern for their needs. The sales call degrades from a sincere dialog into two simultaneous monologues.

Failing to plan is planning to fail, but blindly following the plan is just plain dumb.

We do need to make assumptions before we call on a customer. We need to research the account and learn as much as possible about their business and their industry. Based on this we should formulate some questions and think of some possible advertising options for them. This helps us to organize our thoughts and

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gives us a starting point for the call. The danger in planning lies in being too focused on the “Script,” on the way we expected the call to transpire. We may go in expecting to talk about bringing diners into a restaurant and end up talking about their catering business. Many fighter pilots have died in crashes because they were so fixated on their target that they flew right into the ground. The key is to be focused on the customer rather than on the plan. Our goal should be to learn as much about the prospect as possible and try to see things from their point of view. It is far easier to sell something that is in alignment with their goals, than it is to get them to change their objectives.

We need to listen to the other person with our eyes as well as our ears. Management expert Peter Drucker advised that, “the most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said.” This is why so few people who say, “I’ll think about it,” ever buy anything from you. People naturally avoid difficult things. Only sociopaths enjoy hurting others, most people will lie to you to spare you emotional pain or to protect their own self esteem. They will tell you, “I love your paper,” when they have never read it. They don’t want you to be disappointed. They don’t want you to think less of them because they don’t get what you are saying, so they will make up a “nice” reason to say no. It is important to observe their body language and listen to their tone to discern what is really being said.

Communication power tools

Here are some techniques you can use to effectively communicate with your customers and prospects.

- 1. Take responsibility for getting your message across.** It is your job to help the customer understand what you are trying to communicate.
- 2. Take responsibility for understanding things from the customer’s point of view.** You need to ask questions and carefully listen to what the customer is (and isn’t) saying.
- 3. Never take a conversation at “face value.”** Remember there are many reasons why customers say one thing and think another. Always strive to dig beneath the surface and learn what the customer really feels.
- 4. Restate what the customer tells you to ensure you fully comprehend what they are saying,** “Mr. Customer, I want to make sure I properly understand what you’re saying. What you’re saying is that you’re happy with your dining room traffic, but you want to increase your delivery trade, is that correct?” (This has the added benefit of demonstrating your interest in the customer and their problems)

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- 5. Never assume your customer knows what you know.** Explain everything as clearly as possible. Use metaphors and examples familiar to the prospect to make your point. “Just like you have a big truck to carry everything you need on a job, the larger ad can carry all the information customers need to know about your business.”
- 6. Whenever possible, show, don’t tell.** Show your customer examples of the product you are recommending. Use testimonials and stories to help a prospect “see” your point.
- 7. Don’t presume a customer has a problem unless they have told you they have a problem.** If you propose a solution to a customer’s problem before they have clearly told you it is a problem they may take offense. “This guy thinks he knows my business without even asking how I feel about it. Who does he think he is!”

Communication is hard work

Pay attention to the interactions you have with other people as you go through your day. Do you think the clerk at your local coffee shop is truly concerned about whether you have a “nice day” or not? Do you want everyone you pass in the office to have a good morning? Most human interactions are trivial and facile. We forget them almost as soon as they are finished. We do this to acknowledge others without expending the energy and time required to have a deep conversation with another human being. This is a sound strategy to help us get through our day, but we need to have meaningful conversations with our coworkers and our customers. These meetings need to be true “Meetings of the minds.” By taking responsibility for communicating with others in our life we will not only be more successful in our careers, but we will also gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the other people in our lives.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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