

KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

To send the right message, you need to know who you are talking to

We've all been there – you open an email or mail advertisement, and within about five seconds, determine that the sender doesn't know anything about you, and doesn't care to, yet they want your business (your money). This feels insulting, and you reject them immediately.

When you have a conversation with someone, the advantage is that you have the opportunity to ask clarification questions, observe facial expressions, hear voice inflections, or read body language. When you write a message to an audience that you can't see, hear, or speak to, you enter the world of one-way communication, and you risk having your message misunderstood or possibly rejected.

In order to get your message across and you intend it, and elicit the response you hope for, it is important that you take the time to understand the position of those your message is targeted, it is the equivalent of being a good listener. Let's take a look at some types of one-way messages, and what you need to think about before you hit the send button.

PROPOSAL /RFP RESPONSES

Writing proposals and responding to RFPs is not everyone's favorite thing to do, but it is a necessary part of many businesses. When submitting a proposal, you must remember that you are trying to tell you prospect what you can do for them- meaning you need to understand what they need. If you have ever been in a conversation with a person who lets you talk about yourself, but at every turn shifts the conversation back to themselves, you are experiencing what it is like to read a proposal that talks about what a company does but doesn't address what a customer needs. This is where many deals die.

Before you write the first word of your proposal, due diligence is necessary – find out why the potential client is seeking services. Have they worked with your competitors? If so, what went wrong? Or if they have never used your type of services before, what level of consultation will they need? What are their problems, and how can you solve them? A good proposal is one that tells a company what you do by answering their questions and directly responding to their call for help.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Internal announcements are very delicate, because although they are about business, they have the power to elicit an emotional response from your reader. The key to audience analysis here is sensitivity.

A message sent out in April that no one will receive a bonus, that is followed in June by an announcement of a major acquisition or stellar quarterly performance will leave your employees feeling slighted. Your message can cause employees to ask why they should celebrate the successes of their employer if they are not acknowledged for their contributions. The timing of these messages demonstrates respect – or a lack thereof – for your employees. Acknowledge their work, tell them that rewarding them is a priority, and the plan for making it happen. You will lose the loyalty of employees who played every minute of the game but feel left out of the win.

Another loss is the decrease in formal announcements of promotions, new hires, and exits. When an employee is promoted, it is worth the time and effort to make that achievement known. And when a team member is leaving, that also deserves a special mention. If a colleague's exit doesn't appear to deserve a "thank you and best of luck" message from the company (or the direct manager in a larger

organization), then how important are they? Send a message that what happens to employees is important; in this instance, silence can make a powerful negative statement.

INSTRUCTIONS, POLICIES & PROCEDURES

Every company benefits from having its policies and procedures documented. Aside from business continuity, most industries have some level of regulation they must comply with. However, you have to think beyond surviving and audit and focus on the real end goal – helping your employees perform better. Employees with access to well-written information are more confident when doing their jobs, and have the ability to cross-train in other functions (a win for you). Leverage the knowledge of your subject matter experts, and take the time to interview the people who actually do the job – it is most important that the documentation is written with them in mind.

WEBSITE COPY

As with business proposals, your website is a statement of who you are and what you do. It is meant to attract people to your business, not to be a love letter to yourself. In order to attract your customer base, you need to understand who they are and what appeals to them. If you want to sell clothes to teens, muted colors, formal language and classic fonts on your website may appeal to you, but are more likely to remind them to do their English homework than to entice them to shop on your site.

Talk to actual teens; find out what draws them in and what is missing for them in your industry, so you can fill that gap. Otherwise, it will only take seconds for them to leave your site and move on to your competitor's. Rebuilding your website, re-launching an email campaign, and hiring fresh copywriters in an effort to win back lost customers could be an expensive clean-up effort that could have been avoided.

EMAIL

This may seem like the most obvious category, as lessons on email etiquette have become as common and elementary as keeping your elbows off the table. As a refresher, just remember that if you haven't met your recipient, or can't see them in person, they don't have the benefit of knowing your personality or reading your facial expressions. Take a moment to read your email to yourself or a colleague before sending. Use a light, professional tone to keep your reader at ease. And if the debate is stretching on or tensions are running high, recognize when it is time to pick up the phone or plan a face to face conversation.

THE ULTIMATE MESSAGE

This article could go on for volumes about how communication can go wrong, but the underlying theme is clear. By not taking the time to know and understand your audience, you lose customers, strain relationships, and damage loyalty, and become misunderstood. What you intend to say and what you actually say are no longer partners. It is worth your time and effort to listen before you speak, learn before you write, and become known as someone who cares about those on the receiving end of the message.