



Simplify Communication to Get Your Message Across

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I routinely receive more than 75 e-mails every day, have about 100 cable television stations to choose from, can look up virtually any topic on the Internet, receive scores of mail pieces each week, and have an untold number of voice messages daily.

It is not surprising that the average person is receptive to but a fraction of information before them. Thus, there is a dilemma: How do I get *my* message across in such an information-saturated world?

Effectively reaching your audience begins with an understanding of mass communication. Follow three principles when competing for the finite attention of an audience:

1. Keep your message simple.
2. Keep repeating the message.
3. Use multiple modalities to communicate the message.

Simplicity

Communicate with short, simple, and focused messages. The more you clutter your message with tangential information, the more likely the core message will be minimized or overlooked.

Do not go “on and on” and overpower the other party with the sheer volume of your information. Concentrate on making one or two key points. When I review something I just wrote (e.g., e-mail, letters, reports), my first objective is to delete non-essential words, sentences, or concepts. You should do the same.

Repetition

Express a key point for 10 seconds six different times rather than make the same point once for 60 seconds. Simplifying

and then repeating a point increases the odds of that point lodging in the prospect’s mind.

Multiplicity

People respond differently to different communication modalities. If you plan to communicate a message four times, communicate once by phone, voicemail, e-mail, and letter. By using all four modalities or others to convey the same message, you hedge your bet that a given modality might not be most effective to a given recipient.

Time Efficiency

Focus on making your finite time more efficient while showing genuine respect for the prospect’s time constraints:

1. Shorten every communication. Limit e-mails to two sentences, not five paragraphs. Leave a 10-second voicemail message, not one that lasts a minute. Write a one- or two-paragraph letter, not pages. In every instance, the central point of your communication becomes more clear. And, the aggregate time saving for both the prospect and yourself can be considerable.
2. Use generic documents and customize them as needed. Many communications are a variant on the same theme; for example, a thank you follow-up note following a sales call. Take time to craft one well-written note and avoid “re-inventing the wheel.” Likewise, recurrent voicemail messages that say roughly the same thing can be scripted and easily repeated.
3. Play the voicemail “card” when you have little chance of reaching the other party. There are times when you prefer *not* to reach the other party, as a dialogue consumes valuable time and may not be particularly important at that juncture. Such voicemail messages can be delivered with confidence (i.e., you know going in that you’ll be leaving a voicemail), and many messages can be delivered in a short time.



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In addition, some authorities consider the physical exam findings of retinal hemorrhages to be pathognomonic of child abuse.

Historically, under common law, there was no duty to report even known cases of child abuse. Today, all 50 states mandate that specific individuals report suspected child maltreatment. Among those required to report are teachers, medical providers, nurses, mental health workers, sometimes clergy, and dentists. Check your specific state statutes to determine which agencies should be notified about suspected child abuse.

In addition, the Child Welfare Information Gateway offers advice and state-by-state reporting contact information on the How to Report Suspected Child Maltreatment page of its website, available at www.childwelfare.gov/responding/reporting.cfm.

Most states grant immunity to any professional who, in good faith, reports suspected child abuse. This means that the person reporting suspected abuse cannot be sued for alerting the authorities, provided that the report was made with a reasonable belief that abuse had occurred. Moreover, in at least 42 states, the *failure* to report abuse can lead to both criminal and civil liability upon professionals who fail to notify the authorities despite having a reasonable belief that the child has been mistreated.

The take-home point is this: Urgent care centers across the United States see children every day who are victims of abuse. In fact, I suspect that we see a disproportionate number of abused children inasmuch as the abusers bring their children to these centers knowing that urgent care providers may not be as familiar with patterns of abuse as their emergency department counterpart.

If you suspect abuse, report it to the appropriate state agency as defined in your state's statutes. Doing so may save the child's life. Not doing so may end your career and, more importantly, the precious life of a child.

As I write this, a little girl I treated in the emergency department last month lies in a persistent vegetative state, trached and on a ventilator, in a long-term pediatric hospital in Phoenix. She presented posturing and unresponsive via paramedic ambulance after 911 was called by the mother's boyfriend, who stated the child was "not acting right." I intubated her and sent her emergently for a CT scan; she was found to have multiple skull fractures, an acute subdural hematoma, and diffuse cerebral swelling.

She, too, "fell out of bed." ■

References

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information. *Fatalities: Statistics and Interventions*. 2004.
2. Helfer RE, Kemp CH. *The Battered Child*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968; page 105.

4. Consider a low-cost/high-impact public relations blitz. Set aside one hour starting at 6 p.m. (or over a weekend) and leave 50 or more employer contacts a message such as:

"Hello, this is Dr. Maginnis calling from Downtown Urgent Care. I am calling to thank your company for your business, find out how we are doing, and see if you have any problems that we can address. I am available most afternoons at 453-1834; call me if I can be of help."

Getting Started

Begin developing a communications strategy by creating a list of communication actions that are amenable to a generic document or script.

Generic e-mails

1. Confirming a meeting
2. Meeting follow-up
3. Confirming a "closed" account
4. Just checking in
5. Announcing a new service, location, or employee

Generic letters

1. Annual thank you plus questionnaire
2. Introductory letter
3. Contractual cover sheet (as appropriate)

Scripted voicemail messages

1. Just checking in (alternate with e-mails)
2. Confirming a meeting
3. Thank you for meeting/summary follow-up

Generic documents

1. Formal proposals
2. Reference list (updated constantly)
3. Staff profiles

Summary

In order to get the most out of your communications strategy, you must:

- proactively develop a communications plan.
- develop a generic document and/or script in support of each plan component.
- execute the plan as an integral part of each workday.

The slogan, "reach out and touch someone," applies more than ever in an increasingly impersonal, frenzied world. Such an "in their face" approach increases the probability of potential clients knowing who you are and using your clinic when the time is right. ■