

PART FOUR

Delivering the product to the client

CHAPTER 12

Communication skills and presenting your ideas

Learning outcomes

The key learning outcomes from this chapter are to:

- recognise the importance of effective communication to consulting success;
- understand the process of communication;
- be able to establish objectives for communication;
- recognise that communication has rational and emotional aspects;
- appreciate the advantages and disadvantages of verbal, written and visual mediums for communication;
- recognise the importance of delivering your findings to the client;
- understand the means by which those findings can be delivered;
- appreciate some rules which will make the communication of findings more effective.

12.1 The nature of business communication

Communication is a fundamental aspect of our lives. The facility to communicate subtle and complex messages is what enables us to organise tasks: to decide what needs to be done, to allocate different jobs to different people, to discuss how they should be undertaken and to agree how the rewards of that cooperation are to be shared. In brief, communication allows us to build organisations and use them to create value – to manage and undertake business. It is not surprising that understanding communication and being an effective communicator are critical to success as a consultant.

A consultant aims to develop and promote a new course of action for a business. If the business is to take the consultant's advice, the consultant must communicate his or her ideas effectively. But communication is not just about informing people. It is also about motivating them to act in a particular way. Successful management is not just about understanding the business one is in, or even about being

able to make the right decisions. It is also about inspiring people, motivating them, developing the power to push ideas forward and taking a leadership role. These skills may seem elusive, but a major part of them is understanding how to be a proficient communicator. To be effective as a communicator one needs to understand communication at several levels. Communication is not just about transferring information: it is about influence as well. Good consultants not only relate their ideas but also actively *advocate* a course and *motivate* others to follow it. People are social beings and when they communicate they interact at many levels. People act as a result of the information they are given and their actions are coloured by the nature, tone and context of the communication as well as its content. Consultants must understand the *how* of communication as well as *what* is to be communicated. As we will see later, effective communication is an integral part of leadership.

Communication can be thought of as a process. As is often the case when relating ideas it is helpful to create a model that can describe and be used to explore them. A general model of communication has been developed which highlights some of the important features of the process. In this model there is a distinction between the sender of the message and its receiver. The first stage involves the decision by the sender on what they wish to include in the message that has to be sent, that is, what information they wish to send. The next stage involves encoding the message in some form, that is, expressing it in some way using a symbolic system – a language of some sort. The third stage involves transmitting the message through some medium. It is possible that the message may be confused by ‘noise’ interfering in the communication medium at this stage. The fourth stage involves the receiver of the message actually receiving it and decoding it. The fifth stage involves the receiver interpreting and acting on the message. The whole process is governed by a feedback mechanism. The act of communicating is modified in response to the reactions of the receiver. We may illustrate this process in the form of the diagram in Figure 12.1.

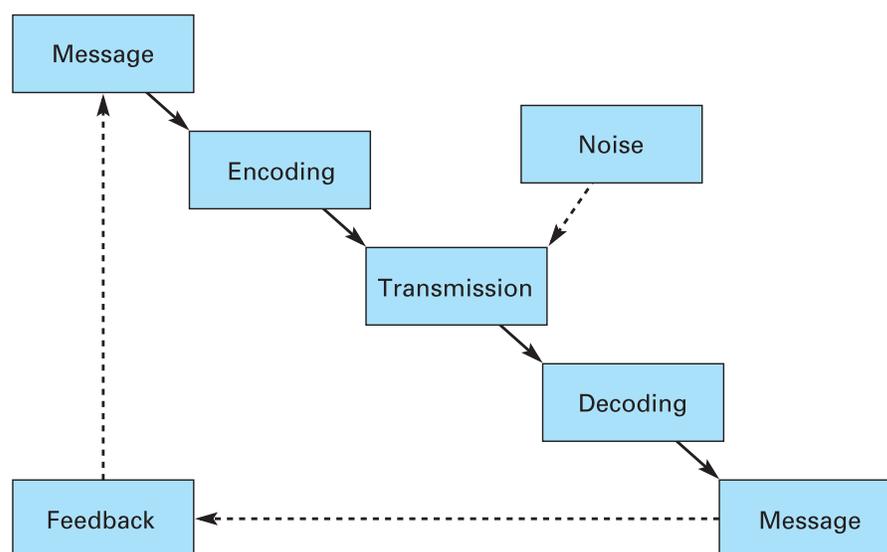


Figure 12.1 The communication process

This model, though quite simple, actually tells us a lot about the nature of communication and how we can go about managing it. In particular it highlights:

- the fact that we never send information directly; it must first be encoded in some way;
- that communication can occur only if both the sender and receiver understand and share the rules of encoding/decoding the message – the language used;
- that the message may be interfered with by noise in the medium through which it is being transmitted – the message may be misunderstood;
- that receiving a message is an active part of the communication process, not a passive one;
- that actions are taken as a result of communication.

These are important points that we will need to keep in mind when we start to consider the management of the communication process.

12.2 Communication as a business tool

Communication is a fundamental aspect of business life. Business communication is not something that is undertaken for its own benefit. Communication is effective only if it leads to the right decisions made and, as a result, the correct courses of action followed. People cannot make the right decisions unless they have the right information to hand. Communication is the means by which people obtain and transmit information and indicate what information they need in order to make decisions. Actions are a result of the decisions that people make. Communication can encourage them to take one particular course of action over others. It is a process governed by feedback. Once initiated, communication leads to further communication. We judge other people's perceptions of our actions by the feedback (response communication) we get. In general, positive feedback encourages or reinforces particular actions. Negative feedback discourages them. Communication, information, decision-making and action-taking are then linked in a loop. Managing communication effectively, using it as a business tool, is about managing this loop in its entirety.

Communication is not simply a passive, background aspect of organisational life; it is the very thing that makes organisations happen. It is therefore important that communication is looked upon as an active part of business activity. And, as with any business activity, the objectives of communication need to be considered. Of course, the extent to which formal and explicit objectives are set will depend on the nature of the communication. A major presentation to the client will demand a formal consideration of objectives. A telephone call to check on some facts will have objectives that are implicit and will not need much explicit consideration. Nonetheless, all communication should be undertaken with some objective in mind. The following is a quite general framework for setting communication objectives. They apply to any communication: not just those between the consultant and client but those between members of the consulting team.

The critical objective is:

- What do I want to happen as a result of this communication?

In other words, the question to be answered is not, 'What do I want to say?' but 'What do I want to happen as a result of saying it?'

Once this objective has been resolved the following questions need to be asked:

- Who will be the recipients of the communication?
- What information needs to be conveyed?
- What actions should the recipient(s) take as a result of the communication?

One of the key actions that the recipient might take is to provide you with some information, so it is also important to consider:

- What information should they give as part of their response? (In other words, 'What do I want them to tell me?')

People act on emotional as well as rational grounds. They emerge from communication encounters feeling motivated or demotivated. So consider:

- How should the recipient *feel* as a result of the communication?

A further question that should be asked is:

- What information do the recipients need in order to act in the way desired?

Don't flood the listener(s) with information. Consider what is the minimum information the audience will need to complete the actions required. Consider whether it will be a hindrance if the recipients have to come back for more information. Or will this in fact help? This question is related to a further one that must be asked:

- What level should the information be at?

How deep is the audience's understanding (and desire to understand) specific details? Do they want a broad picture or a highly detailed account? How technically competent are the audience? How much technical detail do they need? Don't forget that communication is a continuous process, not a one-off exercise. Consider what follow-up actions will be needed as a result of the communication to ensure the desired actions occur. The consultant is engaged in a continual process of communication with the client. This process does more than just transfer information – it is the basis on which an effective and rewarding working relationship is built.

We can integrate these questions into the model of business communication illustrated in Figure 12.1.

12.3 Verbal and non-verbal communication

If the written word is the skeleton of organisational communication then the spoken word is its flesh. Oral communication is so pervasive that we often forget that it constitutes a distinct aspect of organisational life. The types of spoken communication vary enormously and the situations in which it occurs are diverse. Oral communication can occur between just two people, within a small group

(the consulting team) or to a large audience. The communication can be one-way or interactive. The forum in which the communication takes place can be either formal or informal. It can occur with the communicators located together, or with the assistance of modern communication technology, separated by enormous distances. Teleconferencing allows long-distance group communication to occur. The spoken word can be 'stored', although this requires the use of sound recording technology.

The advantages of oral communication are:

- 1 it is flexible: communications can be generated quickly;
- 2 it is of relatively low cost;
- 3 the communication can be supported by personal contact: persuasion may be easier;
- 4 the meaning of messages can be complemented and modified by paralanguage and non-verbal communication (*see below*);
- 5 it allows instant feedback.

There are, however, a number of disadvantages:

- 1 It does not (usually) leave a permanent record.
- 2 It can be difficult to control and direct (especially when large groups are involved).
- 3 Responses are expected quickly: there may be little time to plan and think ahead.
- 4 It can easily be dominated, especially where there are strong-willed people with opposing views.

The fact that verbal communication is 'instantaneous' and 'inexpensive' leads to such communication often occurring on an *ad hoc* rather than a planned basis. We can be called upon to respond to an oral communication (say, to give an immediate answer to a question via a telephone call) in a way that we are not with a written communication. We can have time to think before responding to a memo or email. Indeed, as social beings, we are required to indulge in oral communications to a much higher degree than in other forms of communication. Note that every human society has access to a spoken language though, historically, only a minority has found the need to develop written versions of that language.

This insistence that we engage, almost instantaneously, in verbal exchanges means there is a particular challenge in planning for oral communication. However, there is still a great deal to be gained from planning and a little time dedicated to this can reap enormous benefits in terms of its effectiveness. Some situations, particularly those that are formal and those that involve communication to larger groups – presenting the final report, for example – are relatively easy to prepare for. With a presentation or a speech, the planning has a great deal in common with that of written communication. Indeed, the words spoken may be from a written script. With less formal communications, or those to small groups where the oral interaction is highly iterative and built on feedback, the planning may have to occur while the conversation is unfolding.

Planning for oral communication falls into two types: *prior* planning, where what is to be said is decided before the conversation occurs, and *ongoing* planning, which occurs while the conversation is taking place. This second form of

planning is, in a sense, more natural in that – to some extent or other – we all do it anyway. Yet, because we are not being given much time to think, it is perhaps the more difficult. It can be made much easier by a little prior thinking about the conversation that is to take place. Oral communication has the same objective as other forms of communication and the same questions, such as the following, should be considered:

- What actions do I wish the recipient of the conversation to take?
- What information should be given?
- What should be the tone?
- How should the recipient feel?

Additionally, however, some consideration should be given to the kind of response the recipients might make:

- What kind of questions are they likely to ask?
- What additional information will be requested?
- What kind of problems and objections might be encountered?

Considering these questions before the communication starts will aid ongoing planning during the communication. It will greatly enhance the effectiveness of that communication. The meaning transferred through verbal communication is not just encoded in the words used, it is also related by how the words are used. The impact of a verbal communication is governed at several levels. The meaning encoded in verbal communications must be considered in terms of *paralanguage* as well as formal language. Speech carries information through the sounds that are made (language). But it also carries important information in the way in which that language is used. Those aspects of spoken language that are not related to the actual content of what is being said are collectively known as *paralanguage*. As an old saying goes: 'It's not what you say but the way you say it.' Paralanguage includes aspects of spoken language such as:

- Tone of voice – indicating emotions, for example anger, expectation, etc.: *They sounded very positive about the idea!*
- Timbre of voice – indicating attitude, for example trembling with apprehension, sneering with condescension, etc.: *It's a complicated idea. I don't understand it. It certainly doesn't help when experts talk down to you about it!*
- Timing – particularly important for indicating degree of consideration and conviction, for example: *The client has finally agreed. Mind you she took some convincing. She paused for ages before she said yes to the budget we proposed.*

Paralanguage is particularly important in communicating the emotional context of what is being said. Consider how flat and unemotional a voice synthesised by a computer can sound. This is because such a voice contains no paralanguage signals. A challenge in planning oral communication that is not encountered in planning written communication is the consideration of non-verbal and paralanguage aspects of the communication. We do, of course, deal with these aspects constantly without really thinking about them. We are, to a great extent, instinctive communicators. If, however, we wish to effectively manage communication and its effects, the ability to consciously control these aspects of our communication

is a powerful tool. The fact that there are rational and emotional aspects to all communications means that the effectiveness of communication is an intimate mixture of content and context; of what is said and how it is said. With verbal communications, paralanguage and body language are particularly important signifiers of context. Non-verbal communication includes such aspects of communication as the following.

Facial expression

Particularly expressive elements of the face, changes in which constitute forms of non-verbal communication, are the eyes, eyebrows and mouth. Consider:

It was a radical idea – he raised his eyebrows at the thought of it.

She was a bit critical – but with a smile.

Body language

Body movements add to and extend spoken communication. It is easy to send both positive and negative messages with body language. Most body language signals are sent and received subconsciously.

Posture

The positioning of the whole body with respect to what is being communicated can be a form of expression. An open posture (arms relaxed by the side of the body) is more inviting than a closed, defensive posture (arms folded across the chest).

Gestures

Specific movements may add emphasis, for example pointing, arm opening (indicating welcome), looking at the watch (indicating boredom) or bringing the hand to the chin (indicating consideration). Gesture can mirror meaning. Relaxed body postures are more inviting than tense ones. Facial gestures can indicate whether something is an enquiry or a statement. Open body postures are an indication that the debate is still 'open', closed body postures that it is 'closed'. As discussed above, the objective of business communication is not so much one of delivering information but one of eliciting action. The management of communication can then be considered in two interrelated parts: first, making people receptive to the communication – that is, building rapport – and, second, encouraging them to act on the message – that is, motivating action.

12.4 Written and visual communication

Written communications are the backbone of organisational communication systems. The consultant's report, whether backed up with a presentation or not, is often seen by the client as the 'product' of the consulting exercise – the thing

that is actually being paid for. The use of a written medium has a number of advantages in a business context:

- 1 With the written medium there is time to plan the communication before it is delivered.
- 2 Written communication is permanent; it can be stored.
- 3 It is unambiguous: what's written is written!
- 4 Written communications are easily copied.
- 5 The receiver has time to analyse the content of the communication at leisure.
- 6 It can be supplemented with visual communications (e.g. diagrams, graphs, etc.).

There are, however, a number of disadvantages to written communication:

- 1 It is slow compared with verbal communication.
- 2 There is little opportunity to modify the communication with paralanguage.
- 3 Feedback is restricted: there is a limited opportunity for the receiver to explore the communication with the sender (unless verbal communication is used as a supplement). Modern communication technology such as email makes feedback easier. However, it is still slower than verbal communication.

The most important pieces of written communication the consultant makes are the initial project proposal and the final report.

The visual image is a fundamental form of communication. It has a number of advantages:

- 1 The visual image can be very powerful.
- 2 It can be used to simplify complex ideas and relationships. (This is an idea discussed earlier, in Section 9.4.)
- 3 It can be used to support and add impact to other forms of communication.
- 4 Images are remembered (more so than words).

There are, however, a number of disadvantages:

- 1 Without supporting explanation the image may be ambiguous.
- 2 It may require special interpretation skills.
- 3 Production may be costly.

Visual images used in communication are diverse: diagrams, graphs, photographs, sketches or drawings. Some techniques for visualising information so that patterns and relationships become clear were discussed in Section 9.3. Visual stimuli can be three-dimensional, for example models. The visual image can be used in a variety of communication scenarios:

- when the subject of the communication is primarily visual;
- when complicated ideas need to be simplified;
- when complex relationships need to be demonstrated;
- when the communication requires emotional impact;
- when the message needs to be remembered: we remember information in the form of images much better than in a verbal form.

Given its strengths and weaknesses, visual communication really comes into its own when it is used in conjunction with other forms of communication. Some particularly important forms are:

- with written text:
 - diagrams, graphs and charts in reports;
 - images and pictures in product guides;
 - images and pictures in printed advertisements;
- with the spoken word:
 - slides and overheads used in presentations;
 - images in sales presentation materials;
 - images in television and print advertising;
 - models used with small group forums. Particularly important here are stimuli for brainstorming, focus group and other creative sessions.

The visual medium is very effective at representing information in a way that is memorable, draws attention to relationships and has impact. Take it as a rule of thumb that people will remember five to seven pieces of information from a visual image. Try to organise the information that you wish to communicate so that each image has around this number of key points. Key points include not only facts but also relationships between facts; so not only that this year's sales are £2 million but also that they are larger than last year's and smaller than is hoped for next year. Be creative with visual images. Graphs are a good way of illustrating facts and the relationship between them but their impact can be made greater by customising them with bespoke images. Complex arguments can be made clearer by the use of flow diagrams that indicate how different aspects of the argument are logically interrelated. Images can also indicate the way the audience is expected to feel about the information. Imagine a graph of a company's sales performance to which has been added the illustration of a rocket soaring away in flight – or the illustration of a sinking ship!

As a test for a visual image, ask the following questions:

- 1 If the audience were asked to summarise the image, what five facts would they indicate?
- 2 How would they feel about those facts? (That is, would they react positively or negatively?)

These points will be developed later in this chapter, when we consider the formal presentation of findings.

12.5 Planning the communication

The communication of the findings of the consulting exercise to the client is an event of great importance. The client is likely to see this as what he or she has 'paid for'. If the consulting exercise was an information-gathering exercise then the communication is the means by which the information is delivered. If the project is offering advice on a business development strategy then the final communication is the means by which that advice is made known. Even if the

consulting has taken a process approach and the outcomes delivered are a result of the consultant–client interaction, the final report provides a tangible ‘capstone’ to the project.

The consulting project will have generated a lot of information and ideas. The main challenge in producing the communication is organising that material so that the message you want to send is delivered in a coherent and convincing way. Barbara Minto, a consultant for McKinsey & Company who went on to specialise in communication, describes one very effective approach in her book *The Pyramid Principle*. The basis is to organise ideas into a hierarchy (a pyramid) so that they are sorted and interrelated. Minto lays down three rules for connecting ideas:

- 1 Ideas at any level in the pyramid must be summaries of the ideas below them; conversely, ideas at any level may be expanded upon at a lower level.
- 2 Ideas in each grouping (pathway in the pyramid) must be ideas of the same kind – that is, they must relate in some way and can be grouped together.
- 3 Ideas in a grouping must be ordered according to some internal logic.

Minto’s ideas apply to business communications in general. There are a number of ways in which they might be applied to the challenge of producing a consulting report. The following is my own approach. You may interpret directly Barbara Minto’s ideas to devise your own. I use four levels. These are illustrated in Figure 12.2.

The ‘big idea’

The ‘big idea’ is what the whole consulting exercise is about. It is the central theme that unifies the exercise. It should be related to the original aims and objectives of the project. So, the ‘big idea’ might be ‘to expand the business’ or ‘to improve profit margins’ or ‘to enter an international market’ and so on.

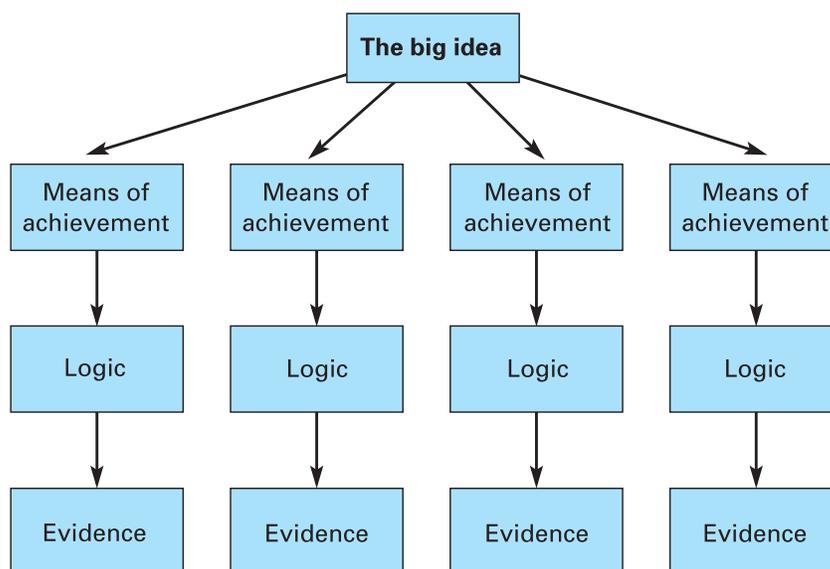


Figure 12.2 The pyramid of ideas for relating consulting findings

Means of achievement

How can the big idea be achieved? Expanding on this is where the consultant adds value. So, if the big idea is to expand the business, this level must expound on the options for expanding the business. It might include increasing market share in existing markets, developing new products or entering new markets. If the big idea is to increase profit margins, the means of achievement level might consider increasing prices, altering the portfolio mix or reducing costs. This level may also be used to close off options which it is felt will not deliver the big idea.

Logic

This third level connects the means of achievement to the big idea. It provides the explanation of why the big idea will be achieved by the means described in the second level. In some cases the logic will be 'obvious' (to you at least). In others it will rely on subtle interpretations. If in doubt, assume your audience would like to have the idea explained.

Evidence

This final level contains any evidence that is available to justify the logic. It might include internal data on sales or costs. It might be data obtained through market research on the market, its potential and the opportunity it presents. It can include discoveries made through creative sessions and explorations of the type reviewed in Chapter 9. Any of these levels can be expanded into sublevels if this helps clarify communication of findings. The pyramid of ideas can be developed as a team exercise through a brainstorming session. An example is shown in Figure 12.3.

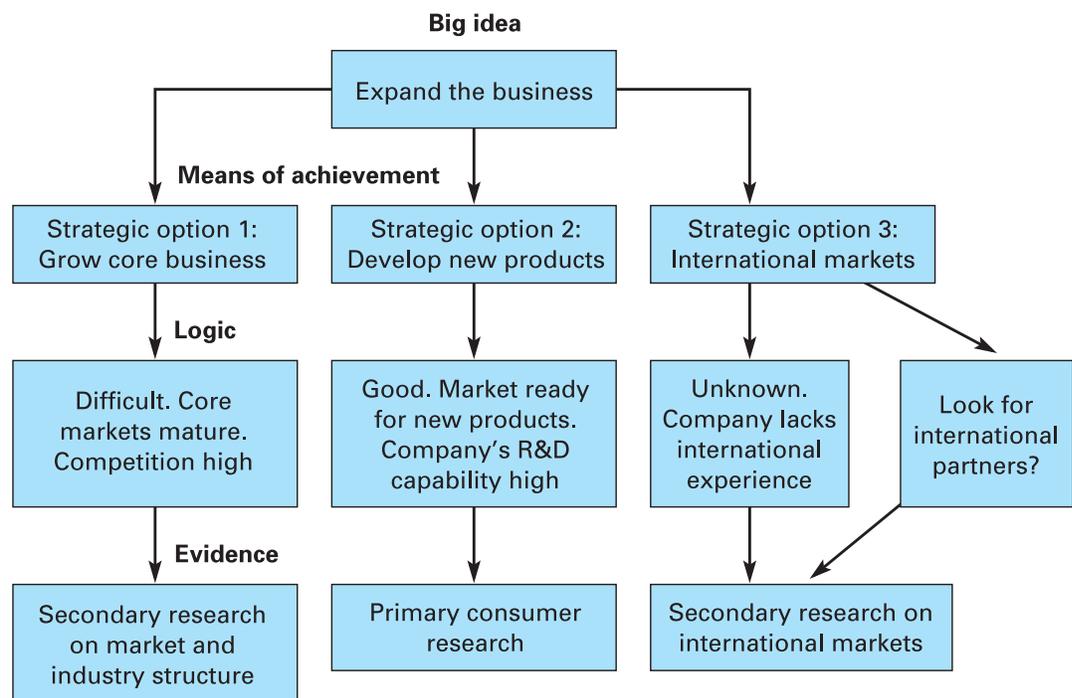


Figure 12.3 An application of the pyramid of ideas

Don't forget, this expansion should be undertaken with a clear view of the objective of the communication. As discussed in earlier in this chapter, a communication objective relates to what you want the recipient to do, not just what you want him or her to know. Presumably, you will want the client to be impressed by your ideas, recognise their value to his or her business and make an effort to implement them. No good consultant would want less.

12.6 The consulting report

A report provides a tangible, accessible and permanent communication of the findings of the consulting exercise. It need not be a long document. In fact, it is a safe assumption that managers do not like to read long reports. What it should be is a succinct and impactful presentation of the opportunity you have discovered for the business. Remember your objectives: it should be a call to action. For an example of a consulting report, please see the Appendix (Marketing plan for Supergelato Ice Cream Ltd).

The report may comprise the following sections.

Executive summary

This is a summary of the findings of the consulting project. But it must be more than *just* a summary. The executive summary is the gateway to the report. It must be short but inviting. A good rule is a one-page maximum. Use bullet points to isolate and summarise your ideas and recommendations. Use an active language style. Be positive. Talk about what the business might achieve if the ideas in the report are implemented. Ask two questions about the executive summary. First, does it invite the reader in? On reading the executive summary will the reader be motivated to delve further into the report? Second, if the reader reads only the executive summary, what is the message he or she will get? Briefly, will the executive summary deliver your objectives for the communication? These two questions may seem contradictory but they are not. If the executive summary is both complete in itself and an invitation to go further it will have impact and set the scene for the expansion of the ideas it relates.

Introduction

The introduction should illuminate the context of the report. It should give any relevant information on the business and its situation. It should also specify the goals, objectives and outcomes that were agreed originally. The introduction will repeat much of the ground covered by the original project proposal. This proposal will provide a template for the introduction. The introduction might be used to give a flavour of what is to come: a further invitation to move into the body of the report.

Body of the report

This is the part of the report where you can expand on your ideas and develop your case. The body of the report can be given a suitable title. It may be broken

down into subsections if appropriate. Don't forget, it is generally better to have a lot of short, well-defined and titled subsections than long sections. They make reading and later accessing easier. The pyramid discussed in the previous section can be used to organise the material for the body of the report. It is better to work your way across the levels rather than down the groups. You don't need to provide logic and evidence upfront for every idea. Lay out the skeleton of your overall case first, then flesh out the details later. Be explicit. Tell the reader what your case will be and promise to support it later. Layer your ideas. The written page must be linear. But our thinking is not: it is hierarchical. Expand your themes in a hierarchical manner. Use internal references to signpost where your ideas are going. If the reader feels tempted to jump from one section to another, fine. You may also want to use visual representations of ideas and information. Some techniques are discussed in Section 9.4. A picture really is worth a thousand words!

Summary and recommendations

Remember your objectives. You should close your report with a final call to action. A good way to do this is with a succinct summary of findings and the recommendations listed as bullet points. This format not only repeats the message but also makes the recommendations accessible. We value originality. Some people feel uncomfortable with this approach to report writing. They feel that they are repeating themselves by saying the same thing in the executive summary, the body of the report and then again in the summary of recommendations. So what? It has been observed that a good business communication tells the reader what it will say, says it and then tells the reader what has been said! If the message is a good one, don't be afraid of getting it across.

Appendices

The trick with appendices is to be cynical. Assume they won't be read! They are a good place to put any information that you have used to make your case and that might be of interest to the reader in the future. If the information is valuable to your case then a summary of it (perhaps using a visual representation) should be in the body of the report. Information that will be of use in the implementation of recommendations (say a list of potential customers) should not be hidden away in appendices, it should be highlighted and accessible in the body of the report.

Clearly, the report will speak for you. It will be a representation of your efforts. You should be proud of it. Make time for its planning and preparation. Check the copy and make sure that typographical, spelling and grammatical errors have been removed. Be warned. Many people find it difficult to check their own copy. It is better to have someone other than the report writer to do the copyediting. Modern word-processing technology makes report writing easy. Sections can be added, revised and moved with ease. Spellcheckers take the strain out of copy checking. Impressive visuals can be edited in. A variety of graphics can be used to decorate the report. But ultimately, it is the substance of the report that matters. A simple, well-written, well-laid-out report relating ideas that will have a real impact on the performance of the business is much better than a report rich with graphics but lacking substance.

12.7 Formal presentations

A formal presentation is a very effective means of getting your message across. It allows the message to be fine-tuned using both verbal and visual communications, to get instant feedback from the client and to respond immediately to points and questions. Formal presentations are being used increasingly as a means of inter- and intra-organisational communication. The formal presentation is, however, a challenging mode of communication. To be effective it must be well organised and delivered with confidence. This confidence comes through preparation and practice. It is worthwhile to take time to plan the visual aids to be used. The images need careful consideration if they are to have an impact. They can be relatively expensive and take time to produce and copy, so plan ahead. Some useful points to remember are as follows.

- Analyse the audience. What images will they find relevant and will have impact? What interpretative skills do they have?
- Don't make the images too complicated. Clear, simple images have much more impact.
- Consider the relationships you need to communicate. Use images that emphasise the relevant relationships.
- Don't forget you can use a sequence of images to build up ideas.
- Use the pyramid principle to organise your message.

The images in the presentation should be used to support the presentation. They are *aides-mémoire* for the presenter and add impact to what the presenter says. There are a number of technologies for producing visual material. The oldest and simplest is just a pen and paper. With a little care and attention, quite professional diagrams and graphs can be produced. Word-processing and desktop publishing systems and drawing packages are readily available and with a little practice they can be used to produce sophisticated and professional visual material. Colour is an effective stimulus in visual communication and can be used to differentiate relationships (say, by the use of different coloured lines on graphs). Primary colours have most impact. Desktop publishing packages usually have colour facilities. Colour is reproduced well on overhead acetates and in electronic presentations. Beware, however, if it is intended to photocopy the overheads for later distribution – colour information is lost in black and white copies. A good deal of information can still be represented in black and white by using broken and dotted lines and different cross-hatching styles for areas. The most common devices for visuals are the overhead projector that uses A4-sized acetates and, more commonly now, laptops with electronic presentations, e.g. PowerPoint (these are better for large audiences and more formal presentations). The following are a few points for producing effective visual support of the presentation:

- Remember that the visual material is supporting the presentation not making it! Don't put text on the screen and read from it.
- Keep the images simple. They should add impact to the presentation, not distract from it.
- Put up bullet points to indicate to your audience the key issues you are identifying. These will also act as *aides-mémoire* if you are presenting without notes.

- Use lower-case text. Upper case is austere and can be difficult to read.
- Use a pointer (either a traditional stick or one of the laser type).
- Consider your positioning relative to the projector. You wish to face the audience, not the screen, so position yourself so that you can see the screen with a slight turn of the head. Avoid blocking the audience's view and don't block the image by standing in the light path.

The audience may find it useful to retain copies of the slides you have used, so photocopies may be provided. You must decide whether you wish to give out the copies at the beginning or at the end of the presentation. Giving them out beforehand allows the audience to annotate them during the presentation. However, the audience will inevitably flip through them. They may feel that all they need is in the handouts and so they don't need to follow the presentation in detail. Also you will lose control of when the audience sees particular images for the first time. For these reasons the presentation may lose some of its impact if handouts are distributed first.

The formal presentation can be quite nerve-racking for the inexperienced, but planning, preparation and practice are great builders of confidence. The rules for a presentation are the same as for any other communication. Think about what you want to achieve from it. Be sure of what you want people to do as a result of the communication. Analyse the audience. Some simple rules for an effective presentation are as follows.

- Rehearse and practise the presentation. This is best done as a team. Not everybody need be involved in the actual delivery, but all can add to it.
- Use notes as *aides-mémoire* but try not to read from a script. It is better to consider the points you wish to make and learn them using the visual stimuli as a prompt.
- Time your presentation. Make sure it is the right length for the time available. Make mental notes of some time-points to enable you to time the presentation and make sure it is on track. Place a watch or clock where you can see it discreetly (say, beside the laptop). Avoid looking at a watch on your wrist. It sends a bad message to the audience.
- On the day, dress appropriately, but comfortably. You'll feel much more confident.
- Before the presentation check that the equipment (e.g. overhead projectors, laptops, beamers, microphones, etc.) is working. It is stressful to have to sort out equipment in front of the audience before the presentation can begin.
- Make sure that the slides you intend to use are in the right order.
- When making the presentation use confident body language: make open gestures and avoid the temptation to cross your arms in a protective gesture. Try to make eye contact with the audience. Smile!
- Pace your speech. Take regular deep breaths. This will help control nervousness.

Try not to be anxious about the presentation. The audience are not out to get you! They are interested in what you have to say. With a little practice effective presenting becomes second nature – then you can concentrate on what you want to say! Increasingly, being able to give an effective presentation is a key skill in the modern business world.

12.8 Making a case: persuading with information

Information is needed for making decisions but decisions are not made on the basis of information alone. How it is presented and the context in which it is presented is also important in influencing decision-making. In business, information is usually presented with the intention of encouraging the recipient to take a particular course of action (the ‘what do you want the audience to do as a result of receiving the information?’ objective). Being influential with information is a matter not only of identifying that information which makes your case but also of delivering it sympathetically to the audience.

Information will be more influential if it:

- is relevant to the decisions the recipient needs to make;
- is pitched at the right level of understanding;
- is presented in a form which makes it easy to understand and digest;
- is supported by impactful visual stimuli;
- is placed in appropriate opinion and feeling contexts;
- is delivered in a situation of good rapport (*see* Chapter 7);
- is part of an interactive process where the recipient is encouraged and supported to explore the information;
- has key points signposted and highlighted.

Don’t forget, if you need to organise the information before presenting it, use the pyramid principle described in Barbara Minto’s book.

12.9 Answering questions and meeting objections in presentations

Formal presentations usually end with an invitation for questions to be asked. It is useful to develop some skills in dealing with the questions – and their close relative: objections. After having invited questions, look around the audience for signs of someone wishing to ask one. As the presenter you are in control. Even after you have invited questions potential questioners may still be looking for a sign from you that they have a right to speak. Eye contact and a ‘yes’ will usually be sufficient to elicit the question. When the questioner speaks, really listen to the question being asked. Use active listening. Consider the nature of the question being asked as well as the question itself. Is it a ‘head’ question, a rational seeking of further information, or a ‘heart’ question, a more emotionally rooted seeking of reassurance?

Some useful points to remember in answering questions are as follows.

- Summarise the question being asked before attempting an answer. This will ensure that you have understood the question and that the rest of the audience have understood it. It will also give you some thinking time.

- If the question is complex and, in fact, contains more than one question, break it down into individual questions. Indicate that you will answer each in turn.
- Answer the question to the best of your ability. You can do no more! If you do not have the necessary information to hand, say so. Take the questioner's details and offer to get back to him or her with the information. But don't forget to do so!
- After answering a question don't just move on to the next questioner. Close the answer by asking the questioner whether the answer is satisfactory: 'Is that OK?' 'Does that answer your question?' 'I hope that's a little clearer' etc.

Objections are a little more difficult to deal with but there are a few good points to remember. Objections may be more heart than head. They may be individual or may summarise what might be the concerns of the entire audience. Meeting objections may require more than fighting fact with fact. If you come up against an objection, try the following.

- Start by recognising (and even welcoming) the objection: 'Thank you. I'm glad you raised that'; 'Right. I can understand your concerns there'; 'An interesting point. Let me see if I can deal with it.'
- Consider the speaker's feelings when meeting objections (even if he or she doesn't seem to be considering yours). If he or she is seeking reassurance rather than information, give reassurance.
- If the objection is clearly emotional or no answer is obvious, ask a question back. 'This is obviously a major concern for you. Why is that?' 'Have you encountered this kind of problem before?' etc. This will get the objector to explore his or her objection (forcing him or her to put it on a rational footing). It will also give you some thinking time!

It may sound difficult, but learn to regard objections as an opportunity to make positive points.

Team discussion points

- 1 Go back to the project proposal you have made to the client. Analyse it as a piece of communication. Ask the following questions:
 - (a) What was the objective of the communication?
 - (b) Does this objective meet the criteria set for objectives discussed in Chapter 5?
 - (c) What actions did you want the client to take as a result of reading the proposal?
 - (d) What is the mix of 'rational' and 'emotional' elements in the communication?
 - (e) Did you talk the client through the proposal on a one-to-one basis? If not, do you think this might have added to the impact of the proposal?

Discuss these issues in your team.
- 2 Prepare a short formal presentation (of five minutes with one or two slides) on the theme of what you feel you have gained from the consulting project experience in terms of learning outcomes, transferable skills and enhanced career prospects. Each member of the team should give this presentation and invite (positive) criticism from the other members of the team.



Summary of key ideas

- An ability to communicate effectively is a critical skill for a consultant.
- Communication is not just about passing information; it is about getting the recipient of that information to act in a particular way.
- Communication has an impact at a rational and emotional level.
- Objectives should be set for communication.
- Communication can take place through verbal, written and visual mediums. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages.
- Verbal communication is influenced by more than just content: paralanguage and body language are also important.
- The final communication of the consulting findings is the 'product' the client is 'paying for'.
- The communication may take the form of a report, a personal presentation or a combination of the two.
- The communication should be planned with the objective of positively influencing the client and getting him or her to implement the ideas presented.
- Using the pyramid principle, organise your message into four levels: the big idea, means of achievement, logic and evidence.
- The most important part of the report is the executive summary: this sells the report to the reader and invites him or her in.
- A presentation should be planned in advance. Impact will be gained if the presentation is pitched to the audience, their level of understanding and interests.
- Visual materials should support the presentation, have an impact and reinforce the key ideas.

Key reading

- Zelazny, G. (2006) *Say It With Presentations: How to Design and Deliver Successful Business Presentations*. Maidenhead, Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Publishing.
- Minto, B. (2001) *The Pyramid Principle* (3rd edn). Harlow, Essex: FT Prentice Hall.

Further reading

- Bowden, R. (2004) *Writing a Report: How to Prepare, Write and Present Effective Reports*. Oxford: How to Books Ltd.
- Bradbury, A. (2000) *Successful Presentation Skills* (2nd edn). London: Kogan Page.
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- Hansen, M.T. and Haas, M.R. (2001) 'Competing for attention in knowledge markets: Electronic document dissemination in a management consulting company', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 46 (1), 1–17.
- Hargie, O. (2006) *The Handbook of Communication Skills*. London: Routledge.

- Laborde, G.Z. (1995) *Influencing with Integrity: Management Skills for Communication and Negotiation*. Carmarthen, Dyfed: Crown House Publishing.
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Case exercise

Holroyd Engineering

Holroyd Engineering is a private company founded some 20 years ago by David Holroyd. The main line of business is machining parts for the automotive industry. The company has 20 employees. David is now 63. He is in the process of passing over control of the business to his son, Donald. However, he still comes in most days. Donald is in his early forties. He heads the management team that consists of four directors. The others are Graham Sullivan, the marketing director, Philip King, the production director, and Tony Milligan, the finance director. Graham, 36, is new to the firm. He joined from a firm of consultants after undertaking a project for the firm. Donald recruited him. David Holroyd recruited Philip, 59, and Tony, 61, shortly after the firm was founded.

Donald Holroyd has called in a consulting team to undertake a full strategic review of the business. He is convinced that it has growth potential that his father has missed. He has asked Graham to lead the project. The team visited the site. Graham had arranged a short presentation on the company and its market. Graham then moved on to show them around. While

on the tour they met David. David rather took over and insisted on showing them the latest machine tools. He asked them about the project they were undertaking. When they mentioned looking at the marketing strategy, he grabbed a gear wheel that had just been cut. He held it up. 'Don't worry about marketing,' he said, 'a good product sells itself!'

The consultants have now concluded their work and are due to report to the business at a meeting where all the key players will be there.

- Q1** Given the sensitivities outlined above, if you were the project leader for the consultants how would you prepare for the meeting?
- Q2** In the meeting itself, what steps would you take as consulting team leader to ensure that the presentation runs smoothly?
- Q3** What would be your definition of a successful outcome for this consulting project?