Mark Ragan and Jim Ylisela's

CORPORATE Writer & Editor

Lessons from the front lines

February 2007

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CORPORATE
Writer & Editor

Lessons from the front lines

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Editorial Contact Information
Published 12 times a year by
Lawrence Ragan Communications, Inc.
111 E. Wacker Dr., Suite 500
Chicago, Illinois 60601
Subscription queries: cservice@ragan.com
Editorial queries: cwe@ragan.com
Web address: *www.ragan.com*
Phone: 800.493.4867
Fax: 312.960.4105

Mark Ragan, CEO
James Ylisela Jr., publisher
Mark Ragan and James Ylisela Jr., editors
Morgan Snouffer, Steve Crescenzo,
Sarah McAdams, David Murray,
contributing editors

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DAVID MURRAY:
Writing Between the Lines

Why we still see classified sections in strategic employee publications

"Babies and bowling scores." With those four words, modern communicators dismiss the value of every bit of content that looks, sounds, feels, smells or tastes like old-fashioned employee publications that companies used to put out 30 and 40 and 50 years ago.

Why do we continue to beat this dead horse? Because, for reasons we don't fully understand, it's still breathing.

It's natural to want to distance modern publications from the ones our editorial ancestors called "house organs." Those publications offered a grim diet of grip-and-grin photographs of white dudes and plaques. This hospital lunch was sweetened only with an occasional side of "cheesecake," the term for gratuitous photos of scantily clad female workers to entice the primarily male readership to read the publication.

Before you declare this last practice entirely outrageous, consider the sort of stuff these editors were trying to get employees to read: House organs were filled with headlines like, "All About the Accounting Department" and "Productivity: Our watchword for 1956." How do you think "Safety First" became a cliché? By spending four decades on the front pages of employee publications!

But that's ancient history. Modern employee publications, of course, are filled with fascinating stories about the company's evolving strategy, revealing profiles of key corporate players, deep think pieces about marketplace dynamics and detailed tip sheets that tell employees how to attack the strengths and weaknesses of each competitor.

Well, actually they're not filled with that stuff. But we all agree that they should be, and that's the direction editors nowadays think they hope they're sure they're headed.

But somehow, despite the red-faced protestations and straw-man mockery of every self-respecting communication conference panelist with the title of manager or above, a few vestiges of the house organ stubbornly remain. The inside back cover of most employee publications lists service anniversaries, promotions, retirement notices and, yes, the occasional birth announcement. The headlines may be more clever, but the safety story has soldiered on.

Perhaps the most common remnant from the bygone era of the house organ is also, seemingly, the most least strategic: the employee classified section. Using just the publications sitting on our desk right now, we could buy a Prowler camper that sleeps eight and has A/C, for $6,500. We could get a chest of drawers for $50, an Internet-equipped computer for $25, unshelled pecans at $3 per pound and a Labrador retriever for free—all from people we trust, because we know where they work.

Of course, employee publication editors aren't auctioneers and employee publications aren't e-Bay. It's not their job to match employees who need money with colleagues who need junk and pets.

But it is their business—part of it, anyway—to foster among employees a sense of being part of a larger human whole.

I grant you: The very best employee publications find stories and features that convey a sense of social unity without prowling so far from the strategic purposes of the organization. But as for the rest, I'm willing to believe the classified section still thrives because the editor has come to the rational conclusion that, given the endless organizational limits placed on his or her ability to fill the publication with great stories, this is simply the most productive way to fill page eight.

And in any case, it sure beats cheesecake.

David Murray is a Chicago journalist. He's also editor of Ragan's Journal of Employee Communication Management.

A case study of case studies

The coastal town of Seaside, Ore., can teach us all a thing or two about employee communications. In a recent issue of *Coastal Services*, the newsletter of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Seaside is featured as the shining example in an article about tsunami planning. This type of "case study" article is common in many newsletters that we come across. In "Planning for a tsunami in Oregon," *Coastal Services* details the steps that the city of Seaside took to come up with a working evacuation plan for its residents in the event of a tsunami.

The article begins with a dramatic anecdote about a 1964 earthquake that sent a tsunami into the town, causing extensive coastal property damage and claiming the lives of four children. Immediately, the writer engages the reader by creating a need—an obstacle for the subject (the town of Seaside) to overcome. The well-structured article goes on to detail the step-by-step course of action that the town took to institute its plan. The writer gives readers contact information at the end of the article in the event the reader is looking for advice in creating a plan.

In this instance, the copy is so engaging and informative that we didn't even care that the graphic was ho-hum at best.

Tip: So what can the coastal town of Seaside, Ore., teach us about employee communications? Simple—the brighter your shining example shines, the better your case study articles will be. If your goal is to inspire or motivate your reader, be on the lookout for extraordinary people doing extraordinary things. The more fascinating your subject, the easier your job will be to engage your reader.

Be bold not boring

We found it surprising that two articles in a recent issue of FBL Financial Group's *Family Ties* were so gosh-darn readable. It was surprising only because the subject matter of the two articles—corporate compliance and corporate matching gifts—wasn't exactly fodder for the next *New York Times* bestseller. Both articles are short (roughly 300 words or so) but entirely necessary. *Family Ties* bucks the yawn-inducing potential of the subject matter with engaging graphics, informative sidebars and, in the case of the article "Compliance rocks: Turning up the volume on corporate compliance," a catchy (albeit kitschy) title.

In the article "FBL helps maximize charitable gifts," a two-page spread is dominated by a bold, vibrant graphic. The copy is very straightforward, quick and factual, but it gets the point across and informs readers how they can get involved in the matching gifts program and specific examples of why they should do so.

In "Compliance rocks," the editorial staff chooses a theme and a metaphor to make an otherwise commonplace subject more palatable to readers. A pullout box gives the basic information of where to go for compliance issues at the company and where to go for more information or to report a problem (i.e., best practices in becoming the office narc).

Tip: Andre Agassi assured us in the 80s that "Image is everything." In the case of less-than-fascinating subject matter in corporate communications, he's absolutely right. An interesting, and even ironic, graphic or photo will act as the string on the reader's mental finger. Boring-but-necessary information in your newsletter that is spiced up visually will help your readers to retain what they read. Good call, Andre.

What do your readers want?

Hormel Foods' matter-of-factly monikered *News* magazine knows exactly how to give its readers what they want: short, sweet and interesting tid-bits to complement its more substantial features. The editorial staff always includes several 100- to 200-word sidebars and short features to give readers information quickly.

In the holiday issue, Hormel gives "The top five reasons to participate in your 401(k) plan," which includes information for readers on how to get more information about investing and taking part in the company's retirement programs. *News* also does a regular "By the Numbers" feature, which gives quantifiable factoids to help boost company morale. Hormel also includes company-specific features such as recipes that can be prepared using their products, complete with professional photograph of the dishes.

The back page of the magazine is dedicated to a 150-word feature called "Career Highlight," which features an employee who has recently achieved something notable within the company.

Tip: Regular features in your publication give readers something to look forward to with each issue. They're also a great way to guarantee yourself a certain amount of space will be filled in each issue. Features don't have to be long by any means. Many readers will be more apt to visit your larger features if they can "take a break" by digesting some smaller, easy-to-read, interesting information.

Tips from the sages: Advice and lessons from masters of the craft

Take care to avoid getting asked the favorite question of Harold Ross,* The New Yorker*'s late editor: "What the hell do you mean?"

—Kathleen Krull

Happy writers are all happy because they have already written something (they have a draft); unhappy writers are each unhappy in their own way because they are staring at a blank screen waiting for something profound to occur to them. It's also a generally accepted truth that most writers don't want to write; they want to have already written. Most writers would love to sit down, write from beginning to end, and then have their readers (and their bosses) tell them what a lovely job they've done.

But most writers *know* that writing well, like doing almost anything well in life, is just plain hard work. It would be nice if there were an easier way, one that excused the labor pains of facing the blank page, squeezing out an imperfect first draft, then rewriting and revising until you become sick of working on the piece. Usually, though, the writer strikes out to write a piece, manages a few sentences, comes back to look at them and discovers they are unacceptable, and sets out on another round. If there were a better way, it's likely that practitioners of the craft would have given away the secret by now: The sages of writing are for the most part a generous lot. They heap their hard-earned lessons on novices and those who are just muddling through, trying to bring them up to speed with their trade secrets. Good writing follows some basic tenets, their collective voices seem to be saying. Here are some of their pearls of wisdom that can make your writing sing—or at least hum along a little more pleasantly.

On being concise

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short or that he avoid all detail and treat his subject as only an outline, but that every word tell.

—William Strunk, Jr.

Keep it simple. Be clear. Say what you mean to say. Often writers find it's not easy to state their thoughts without cluttering their prose. Rid sentences of unnecessary words such as *in fact, all in all, potentially* and such. Use concrete words. Be specific. This will help you construct sentences that are clear, not cloudy. *"It rained every day for a week"* is better than *"A period of unfavorable weather set in,"* says William Strunk, Jr., author of *The Elements of Style.* E.B. White, essayist and author of *Charlotte's Web*, said it this way: "When you say something, make sure you have said it. The chances of your having said it are only fair."

Rid your copy of as many adverbs and adjectives as possible. Adverbs and adjectives can detract rather than add to what a writer is saying. At times they accomplish the opposite of what the writer intends. Writers who pepper their work with adjectives and adverbs are trying to strengthen what they say. But writers would do well to think on the words of writer and editor David Madden: "Go easy on the adjectives and adverbs because in most cases two adjectives for one noun compete with each other for the reader's fullest response and both tend to lose; adverbs modifying verbs tend also to dilute the impact of the verb: '"Die!' he shouted insanely.' The word 'die,' with its exclamation point, is already too much, 'shouted' is implied, and 'insanely' overwhelms all three words before it." Horror writer Stephen King waxes "flowery" on the subject of adverbs, saying, "Adverbs are like dandelions. If you have one on your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you have five the next day … 50 the day after that … and then, my brothers and sisters, your lawn is *totally, completely* and *profligately* covered with dandelions."

Know where you are going and go there. Figure out what you are writing about. Think it through, then boil the idea down to one sentence. This reduction will help you set your destination. It will keep you from wandering side roads that will cost you and your reader time and energy. There is nothing wrong with wandering from time to time; sometimes new material is found that would have remained buried otherwise. The danger is that readers may tire before writers get to what they want to say. Don't bore the reader. "Beware of creating tedium! I know no guard against this so likely to be effective as the feeling of the writer himself. When once the sense that the thing is becoming long has grown upon him,

he may be sure that it will grow upon his readers," Anthony Trollope once said.

Open with strength. Most writers don't sit down and create a piece chronologically, penning a brilliant first sentence followed by an even more brilliant second sentence. Instead, there are likely to be several false starts, with plenty of bouncing around and recasting. Eventually, though, the first line must be written. Here are some examples of first lines that work:

- The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call "out there."

  —Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*
- You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.

  —Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*
- Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

  —Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*
- One July morning last year in Oklahoma City, in a public-housing project named Sooner Haven, twenty-two year old Kim Henderson pulled a pair of low-rider jeans over a high-rising, gold-lamé thong and declared herself ready for church.

  —"The marriage cure" in *The New Yorker*, by Katherine Boo

Tinker. Go back through line by line, word by word, making necessary changes. Out goes a whole sentence here. In goes a new sentence there. The word *sunny* might be better than *beautiful* here. Cut a phrase here to bring an idea into relief there. Write a little more. Revise a little more. Build an image, convey thoughts and inspire feelings in readers. Good writing has many of the same characteristics and problems that other art or craft forms present. "Writing has laws of perspective, of light and shade, just as painting does, or music. If you are born knowing them, fine. If not, learn them. Then rearrange the rules to suit yourself," Truman Capote advised.

Choose the best shape or design for the work. Builders start with blueprints. They decide what kind of house they will build. In the same way, the writer decides what to say and how to say it. The builder decides on a three-story modern brick house. The writer decides on a feature story composed of four sections. The builder gathers the materials he needs: the wood, the windows, the shingles. The writer gathers his subject, style and words. Adjustments must be made along the way. The house must look like a house in the end. Details, if not overdone, can make it unique and more appealing to buyers. Writers get essentially the same deal. The story must follow design and becomes unique through the choices made along the way. "I always begin with some kind of solid, coherent image, some notion of the shape of a book and even its texture," says John Updike. "*The Poorhouse Fair* was meant to have a wide shape, *Rabbit Run* was sort of zigzag. *The Centaur* was sort of a sandwich."

The question is how to do this? Each genre has its own answers with endless variations. In a magazine feature story, for instance, it could be done this way. Let's say the writer wants to write a wellness feature composed of four sections for her corporate magazine. The parts will be 1) the scene or anecdote 2) the backstory 3) the action and 4) the image (as set out by writer and literary critic Carolyn See in her book *Making a Literary Life*). According to her formula, you don't want to come out and say "Yoga is good for you so you should do it." That's no fun. A better way is to say it by building a scene: "On April 5, 2006, Jan knows something is wrong when she reaches over to answer the phone and her arm goes numb. She feels tingling in two fingers, and by the end of the day, her arm dangles, useless, at her side. She cannot put her coat on because of the pain. Three weeks later, Jan looks out the plane window to see the majesty of the Himalayas." The story then tells how Jan studies yoga with Hindu and Buddhist masters before returning home to open the wellness

continued on page 6

Lesson from a poet

P.L. Travers, author of *Mary Poppins*, once related this anecdote to an interviewer at *The Paris Review*:

When P.L. Travers was a young woman, she traveled by train to Ireland to see the venerable old poet Yeats. But before she arrived at his home she decided to bring him a gift. She found a boatman and got him to agree to take her to the Isle of Innisfree, where she collected several large branches of rowan (a tree that in older times was thought to have magical properties and was used to make magic wands and Druid walking sticks) to take as her gift. As she made her way back to the train car she got caught in a storm, and she struggled to maintain the colossus of branches. With difficulty, she made her way finally to the poet's door. A maid, startled by the young woman's drenched and bedraggled appearance took her in and dried her clothes by the fire. Travers, young and embarrassed, was planning how to escape and skip seeing the famous poet. She was just about to beg off when the maid returned and said that Yeats was ready to receive her. Travers ascended the stairs and at the top met a "grandfatherly Yeats who proudly showed her the egg his canary had just laid." The two began to talk, and as they did, Travers noticed a small vase on his desk with just a snip of the great pile of branches she had dragged in. "That's when I learned," Travers said, "that you say can more with less."

center where she now teaches. Next, you give a little history on meditation and yoga. This is where you educate your reader about your subject. In step three, you take the readers into Jan's center so they can see for themselves. You show them what's going on inside the walls. You show them yoga moves, chants and breathing. Then the writer applies the final stroke: an image that will stay with the readers. Jan is in the Himalayas studying with a yogi. She is meditating. She is practicing yoga. She is learning practices to bring to her center where the employee can take a class.

This is how a story is shaped.

To tell a good story you must entertain—and instruct. People respond to stories. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle says this is because people learn naturally through the process of imitation when they are children. Stories are imitations of what is happening, the reproduction of experience that can instruct and be enjoyed. Nature has made this enjoyable for children to ensure the survival of the species. And adults retain the capacity to enjoy stories throughout their lives. This is why people love going to the movies to watch situations unfold that they would be appalled by in real life. "These are the things which we see with pain so far as they themselves are concerned, but whose images, even when executed in very great detail, we view with pleasure. … The cause of this is that learning is eminently pleasurable," said Aristotle. People are capable of enjoying and learning from scenarios laid out before them. That is why writing a good story is powerful. That is why good storytelling can changes lives.

Choose the right words. If writers choose the right words, chances are they will bring off a successful piece. Choosing the wrong words almost always spells failure. Readers will not stay long with a story composed of careless word choice. Raymond Carver, known for his mastery of minimalism, puts it this way: "That's all we have finally, the words, and they had better be the right ones, with the punctuation in the right places so that they can best say what they are meant to say. If the words are heavy with the writer's unbridled emotions, or if they are imprecise or inaccurate for some reason—if the words are in any way blurred—the reader's eyes will slide right over them and nothing will be achieved."

Rewrite, revise. Most writers want their writing to appear fully formed in the first draft and are disappointed when the results come out cluttered, confused and complicated. Writers would like for their writing to be reflections of their great thoughts. But instead, writing is more often an accurate reflection of how the mind really works. That is, great thoughts are mixed with superfluous material. One minute, writers are composing grocery lists, the next their treatises on world peace. Objective, scientific facts are churned in with writers' thoughts and opinions. It's a mishmash, and because of that the writing often comes out a little less fabulous than hoped on the first attempt. And the only way out of the mess for most is revision and rewriting until the cacophony is transformed into clarity.

About writing, E.B. White once told an interviewer at *The Paris Review:* "When you consider that there are a thousand ways to express even the simplest idea, it is no wonder writers are under a great strain. Writers care greatly about how a thing is said—it makes all the difference. So they are constantly faced with too many choices and must make too many decisions.

"I am still encouraged to go on," he said. "I wouldn't know where else to go."

Here's to going on and writing that delivers what writers intend.

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Editor
Corporate Writer & Editor
111 E. Wacker Drive
Suite 500
Chicago, IL 60601

Avoid the obvious—and get to the specifics

Wordy for wordy's sake will lose your readers at the intro

BEFORE

While a magnifying glass comes in handy for enlarging fine print, it can also have startling effects if you use it outside in the sun. By focusing the sun's rays on one tiny spot through the glass, you can generate enough heat to start a fire. It's amazing what a little focus can do.

An introductory metaphor is a proven technique for putting the reader in a familiar context as a bridge to a new context. Try it without the metaphor and see if anything's lost.

That's why leaders at The Standard are bringing new focus to their plans for 2007 and beyond. We've known for some time about the company's vision of industry leadership and our breakaway goals that are integral to achieving that vision. What people consistently want to know is how we'll get there and exactly what steps we'll need to take—as individuals, teams, departments and business or service units. The strategic planning process currently underway is answering that question, and it's largely a matter of focus.

This paragraph spends a little more time than necessary getting to the point.

"I spent some time thinking about where the company is today and where we need to be in 2007 so we're positioned well to achieve industry leadership," said Eric Parsons, chairman, president and CEO. "We obviously have some immediate issues to address, like integrating Invesmart and getting everything in order to take on the California Teachers' Association account next September.

"In addition, there are two things I think are important for us to focus on in the new year. One is delivering exceptional customer service, and the other is driving down costs across the company," said Eric. "If we do those things well—and I know we can—The Standard will be well on its way to industry leadership."

Kill the first and last sentences—too obvious.

These areas of focus clearly are things we all can embrace and work toward on our own. And right now, they are also the lenses through which The Standard's leaders are planning for the company's future and evaluating potential Change the Business initiatives.

Too much context—the delete key.

"I asked everyone involved in the strategic planning process this year to think about how the proposed Change the Business initiatives align with our vision, goals and strategies," Eric explained. "But most importantly, I asked them to consider how they align with these two organizational priorities."

In fact, a short list of initiatives was preapproved by the management committee on this basis. For example, we know that developing a strong, companywide IR architecture is crucial for the company. Not only will it help us meet the needs of the CTA account, but it will also help us deliver improved customer service while driving down future costs. To that end, we'll dedicate substantial resources to IT architecture in the coming year.

This is good—specific, useful. But it takes a while to get there.

AFTER

The strategic planning process currently underway is answering the question we're all asking: Where are we going, and how will we get there?

"We obviously have some immediate issues to address, like integrating Invesmart and getting everything in order to take on the California Teachers' Association account next September," said Eric Parsons, chairman, president and CEO. "In addition, there are two things I think are important for us to focus on in the new year: delivering exceptional customer service, and driving down costs across the company."

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Face-to-face communication

How to cascade and tailor information in meetings

Of course, no one person—including the CEO—can do all the face-to-face communications alone. The best thing he or she can provide is an infectious model of speaking transparently and listening candidly.

But the CEO should also require that his or her direct reports pass all relevant information down to their reports, who should pass it down to theirs, and so forth. Communication at the very top of an organization tends to be good, and at the supervisory level, also, pretty good. Where things get stuck is in the great bottleneck of middle management.

So another communication responsibility of the CEO and his or her direct reports is to help ensure that decisions and plans at the highest levels reach those at the farthest level, without filtering but with tailoring, in ways that are meaningful to everyone in the organization.

The cascade model

Actually, the directional terms we're using here—"top," "highest, "bottom"—aren't really accurate, since they imply a hierarchy in what is more usefully viewed as a lateral process. Information should not be viewed as flowing only "down," but also "outward"—from the decision-makers to the people who produce the products and provide the services—and "inward"—from the front lines in to managers for accuracy of decision-making. Just as a river can flow only within the structure determined by its banks, so also with information.

Best practices

The 5-day cascade template: Saturn

None of this happens without structure, modeling, systems and accountability, and perhaps the most effective example of the cascade model in my experience is the one of Saturn, in Spring Hill, Tenn. It goes something like this:

1. Every Monday, the senior executive team has a one-hour meeting to review performance updates, progress against plans, significant issues and the like. The meeting is "scribed," and the notes published electronically and posted.
2. One Tuesday, the individual members of the executive team meet with their direct reports—AVPs—and tailor the high-level messages to their individual functions: law, marketing, operations, finance, etc. Again, the meetings are scribed and the notes published.
3. Wednesday: Tailoring to the managers charged with operationalizing decisions. Notes posted.
4. Thursday: The front-line supervisors—the most important link in the chain—

Meeting skills: A 12-step checklist

Because:

- Most executive face-to-face communications take the form of a meeting, and
- Most managers spend most of their time in meetings, and
- To judge by the feedback I get—most meetings are a wasteful exercise in boredom ...

... the following review of best meeting practices can help.

12 steps to more effective, more efficient meetings

1. **Decide whether the meeting is necessary.** The main purpose of a meeting is discussion, leading to participation in decisions and clarity through interactive Q&A. No data dumps, so …
2. **Prepare the attendees with pre-reading;** again, use the meeting for discussion and decision-making, not information sharing.
3. **Tighten the attendee list:** one person can report to the rest of his or her team after the meeting.
4. **Provide an agenda in advance,** so people come prepared.
5. **Assign roles to participants before the meeting:** scribing, reporting to team members, preparing to discuss the pre-reading, gathering questions of team members, actively participating in the discussion, and the like. No one should ever arrive at a meeting wondering what it's about or why he or she is there.
6. **Start on time; end early.** There's no reason meetings have to be any specific length—just long enough to get the job done. But they should never run past a certain pre-determined time.
7. **Keep individual presentations to five or fewer slides.** And five or fewer minutes.
8. **Speak less; listen more.**
9. **Field questions as you go,** topic by topic, not all at the end.
10. **Scribe and post** the meeting notes.
11. **Schedule and post** follow-up items.
12. **No** Friday afternoon meetings.

As with any key system or process in an organization—legal standards, software, methods of financial reporting—meeting processes should be standardized throughout the organization.

get the messages, tailor to their work units. Notes published.

5. And on Friday—Friday morning!—the front-line employees discuss that week's news and ideas with their supervisors, with the notes of the meeting transcribed and posted.

Why it works

- Transcribing and posting the notes from every meeting ensures agreement in a common public document, can be used for clarity in future meetings, commits to follow-up, and informs those people who, for whatever reason, couldn't attend the meetings. It is also the evidence of accountability: that the meeting took place, and that everyone is "reading off the same page."
- Tailoring the information to the precise level of detail—that is the practical level of application and decision-making—makes the information most useful to the subject-matter experts in their functional areas where responsibility resides.
- Each level of management holds its direct reports responsible for the next level of meetings—both explicitly in directives and implicitly, through informal follow-up.
- Scheduling regular meetings at the same time every week ensures that busy managers make time for communications.

But perhaps the greatest strength of the process is that it defies gravity—it actually allows information to flow "up" to executives. At each meeting, information is not only given out; the questions and best ideas of employees at every level are gathered and "passed in" at the next week's meeting.

In other words, the reason the best ideas in an organization—those from the people who make the product or provide the services—seldom reach the right level of decision-making is that there's no structure for "listening in." The cascade model provides that structure.

Finally, the cascade model provides a forum for CEO modeling and peer emulation. In other words, if people at the highest level of the organization participate in the model, people at every level will also be inclined towards responsibility for participating in the model—especially with the pressure from their management peers.

And when everyone begins doing something—in this case, communicating—the same way, it becomes part of culture: the way we do business.

Face-to-face checklist

How to establish trust: Selling the 7 C's

Trust is the foundation of all successful communications. Without that, everything else will fail.

In your role as counsel or coach to managers, you must encourage their efforts to build and maintain trust, specifically the following seven elements of leadership communications.

Confidence. "Confidence" comes from the Latin "fides," or faith—as in "Semper Fidelis" the motto of the Marines. Faith is simply the unwavering commitment to an organization's values or goals without demanding continuous proof or demonstration. Faith is the belief in things unseen, and leaders must demonstrate an unwavering faith in an organization's plans, people, products and customers.

Competence. Competence is the ability to do one's job to achieve or surpass predetermined goals. Leaders at every level of the organization who display competence—managing a team to hit or surpass predetermined service and profitability targets—will soon discover that their foundation of trust has been strengthened.

Consistency. Consistency of words over time, and from place to place. This can be a tough one, since messages will change in response to all sorts of changes inside and outside the organization, and must be tailored to the needs of audiences with sometimes conflicting interests. Consistency doesn't mean that you don't get to change your mind or tailor your message. It does mean that you explain the reasons you've changed your mind in light of the research and changing conditions that caused you to.

Credibility. Credibility, or "believability," simply means that a leader's spoken comments match the audience's experience with objective perceptions of external reality. Credibility is the result of research—systematic listening—and shows itself in concrete evidence.

Candor. Candor is the ability to tell another person bad news clearly and directly, the ability to hear bad news without punishing the often courageous deliverer of the message, and the ability to take—and act on—criticism of one's own performance.

Compassion. The goal of communication, as we've said, is "motion": moving employees in the direction of a desired goal. The capacity for motion is "*emotion*," or feeling or passion. "Compassion" means the ability to feel what your audience is feeling: joy, fear, sadness, doubt, friendship, humor.

Character. There may not be one universally accepted code of conduct, but there is universal acceptance that one's actions and the words that describe those actions must align, for reasons of character or integrity.

When you ask accountants to be race-car drivers, it's C.R.A.P.

How come all of our business metaphors are dripping with testosterone? Why can't we ever compare what we do to the ballet, or a quilting bee?

As corporate writers and editors, we sure do love our macho metaphors, don't we?

We're constantly telling employees that we need "all hands on deck" so that we can "chart a course through rough waters." Yo ho ho and a gallon of C.R.A.P.

Or we let our CEO say things like, "I may be the quarterback of this team, but I'm no more important than you—the offensive lineman, running backs, and linebackers." Gag.

Why is it that all of the metaphors we choose are soaked with testosterone? Just once, I'd like to see a CEO get up at a Town Hall meeting and say something like this:

"In order for this business to work, each part of the business has to know what the other parts are doing. You know what it's like? It's like ballet dancing. Just as one dancer needs to know exactly where his partner is at all times during a ballet, so to does sales need to be in synch with marketing, and marketing with engineering. I need you to dance with each other! Leap and prance around like the Sugar Plum Fairies in The Nutcracker! I want you to *plié* until you can't *plié* anymore! As a business, we need to *dance*! *Dance* my little fairies, *dance*!"

Of course, no CEO would ever say that. And no communicator would ever write it. Why? Because business isn't ballet! Business is war! Business is full-contact football, not some sissy dance recital. Business is blood and guts! Only the strong survive!

Of course, this is all nonsense. Business is not war. It's not even a playground scuffle. Business, for most of us, is drudgery. It's spreadsheets and projects and endless meetings and expense accounts and clogged-up e-mail boxes.

That's why all of these macho metaphors fall flat when we try to foist them on our readers. We're not rugged sailors, we type things into computers. We go to meetings. The closest we get to a battle is the endless struggle for the last onion bagel at the Wednesday breakfast meeting. So don't insult readers with macho metaphors, okay?

And as you may have guessed by now, this month's C.R.A.P. (Corporate Rhetoric Awards Program) Award goes to a corporate editor who did just that. I knew I was in for a testosterone shower when I saw the headline:

Shifting into High Gear

Uh oh, I thought. It's going to be a race-car lead. Since I happen to think that NASCAR and Larry the Cable Guy represent everything that's wrong with this country, I hate race-car leads. And this one was actually worse than I expected. Here it is:

"You're in a race—driving a high-performance car that's operated tirelessly to get you well positioned in the pack. The smell of exhaust looms over the thick summer air as you eye the competition surrounding you, some whizzing ahead, others languishing behind. How do you break out of the pack and pass the competition? Tune up your engine? Add more horsepower? Change lanes? All of these are excellent choices when you're serious about winning."

This metaphor falls flat for many reasons, but there are two main problems:

First of all, the writer doesn't even get the damned metaphor right! She starts by telling the reader that he's in the middle of a race … and then she tells him to tune his engine up! I've never been in a car race, but I'm fairly sure you can't tune your engine up while you're going 180 miles an hour. And I'm also quite sure that you can't add more horsepower in the middle of a race.

And although I've never *seen* an actual NASCAR race (I've never had sex with my sister in the back of a pick-up truck, either), I'm fairly sure there are no "lanes" on a race track. Does the writer think this race car driver can turn his clicker on and switch to the passing lane in order to get ahead?

The second reason the damn thing fails as a lead is because the writer didn't consider the audience. This magazine goes to employees at a financial services company based in New York City!

These guys don't watch NASCAR on the weekend. They snort cocaine and go to yuppie bars. They don't drink Schlitz and watch a bunch of rednecks drive fast and turn left. They drink Stoli Appletinis and watch "The Entourage."

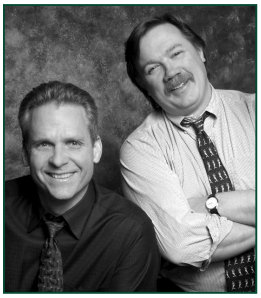
If this story was going to a meat-packing plant in Raleigh, North Carolina, maybe the car metaphor might work. Probably not, but at least you'd have a chance.

But sending race-car metaphors to financial services professionals is like sending the collected works of Goethe to a NASCAR pit crew. They won't know what to make of it.

Here's a tip: If you're going to go with some harebrained, contrived, macho metaphor for business, at least know what you're talking about … and try to pick a topic that the readers will understand.

Regarding the baby and the bathwater

New communication tools abound, but that's no reason to throw out what works



Control is out. Choice is in.

That's the big news coming into 2007, and it's driving many company executives nuts.

Time magazine made the point with its Dec. 25 cover story declaring the "Person of the Year" to be none other than (drum roll, please)… You.

Cheesy as that may sound (and *Time* took a few hits for its choice), the idea demands our attention: The true nature of the Internet puts all of us in charge of information and how we choose to use it, or not.

Most companies will struggle with this concept. That's because organizations—and the people who run them—want to be in charge of everything. Success is about power, and power is about control.

That's not surprising. The top-down approach has been working pretty well since, oh, the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. But change comes a little faster in the Information Age, as shown by this sophisticated timeline that tracks the development of employee communications:

Stage 1 (Industrial Revolution to 1949): Employee communication was limited to all but the most important information.

Highlights: "Shut up." "Get back to work." "Somebody throw some water on that guy." And the more enlightened, "I'm sorry, but we've got standards. You have to be at least 6 years old to work here."

Stage 2 (1950 to 1985): Communication makes a great leap forward. It's still top-down, but a crude form of employee engagement begins to emerge.

Highlights: "Keep up the good work." "Show me more effort and there'll be a little something extra in your pay envelope." And the reassuring, "Don't worry. You've got a job here for life."

Stage 3 (1986 to 2002): Major advances during this period, with the introduction of desktop publishing, intranets and e-mail. Internal communication flourishes. Studies make the connection between effective communication and such worthy goals as profits, productivity and customer satisfaction. Management metaphors are all the rage.

Highlights: "Who's your best friend at work?" "Who moved my cheese?" "Business is like golf." "Business is like geese." "We're a lean organization." "We're ninja masters."

Stage 4 (2003 to the present): Social media changes everything, and communication shifts from employers to employees, bringing us full circle.

Highlights: "Did you see what they said about us on Ourcompanysucks.com?" "I skipped the CEO's town hall meeting, but did you see that clip from *The Office* on YouTube?" "I can't possibly read another e-mail. Somebody throw some water on me."

These changes may be tough for executives, but they're taking their toll on communicators as well. There you were, in Stage 3, finally happy. Lots to communicate, many ways to deliver it, and executives who believe that it matters.

And now this. Your audience is in control. They get to read what they want and ignore everything else. They don't have to depend on you for information; they can go to a dozen Web sites to get it. They're talking directly to the boss through his blog, when they're not too busy listening to each other's podcasts.

Don't despair. Even in the age when everyone is a communicator, some people still need to know what the hell they're talking about. And that's why this is the perfect time for you to review and revise your own communications efforts, in four simple steps.

Step 1. Is anything getting through? With so many choices, what do employees read, what do they toss aside and what makes their eyes roll back in their heads?

Step 2. Who needs to know what? Separate the universal messages from those that matter only to the people who answer the phones. Let's not send everything to everyone just because we can.

Step 3. How can I get it there? What is the simplest, quickest and clearest way to get messages to the people who need them? People absorb information in different ways, and it's your job to figure out how to make it stick. (And remember, some people still like to read print on paper!)

Step 4. Make these changes. Take lunch. Repeat Step 1. Are more people paying better attention? Is the important stuff getting through to the right folks?

Think of this as Stage 5 on our communication timeline. Take all the many ways you have to communicate, figure out what works best for your many audiences and try to get it all out there without making anyone's head explode.

And don't worry; you've got plenty of time. Stage 5 doesn't end until a week from Thursday.

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