

3

chapter

Audience Analysis

GLOBAL MEDIA VENTURES, INC.: MEETING SHAREHOLDERS' NEEDS

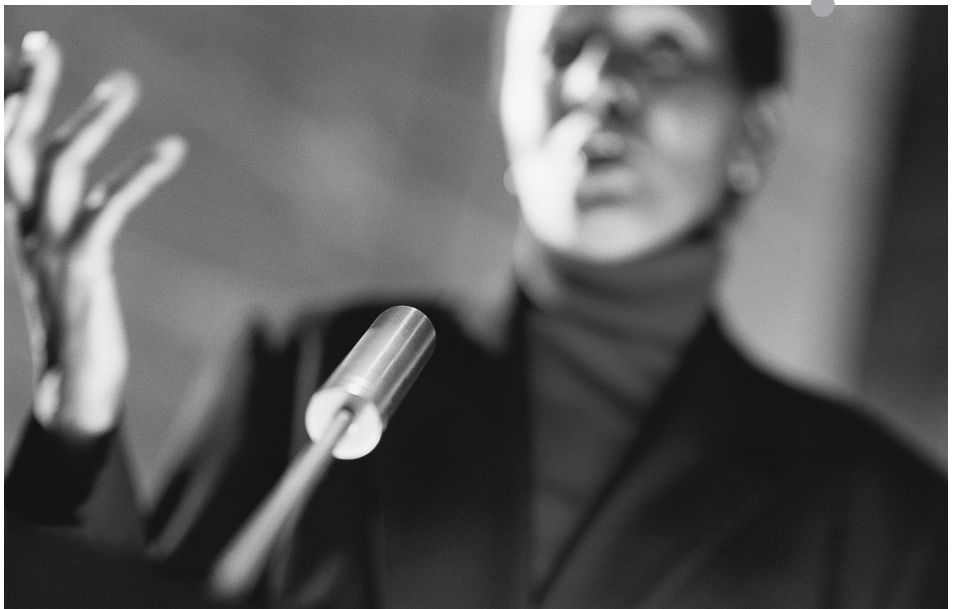
Faced with the challenge of addressing shareholders at the annual meeting of GMV, CEO Kathryn Colter has yet to complete a first draft of her speech. In her talk, she needs to address the company's current financial situation as well as a well-publicized lawsuit brought against a president of one of the

company's divisions. Although she has been able to identify the purposes she hopes to achieve in her speech, she is still uncertain about the information to provide, particularly in terms of details, the order in which she should present this information, and the specific language she should use.

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discussion...

1. How many audiences should Ms. Colter consider in preparing her speech? Although the intended audience is shareholders, will other important audiences be privy to this information?
2. What are the demographic features of each of these audiences? Do they differ in any significant way?
3. What are the concerns, expectations, and interests of each of these audiences?



After studying this chapter, you will be able to

Analyze various business audiences to help you identify the interests, concerns, and questions you need to consider in formulating your messages.

Discuss the general kinds of business audiences and their needs.

Describe the difference between messages that are focused on the audience's needs and expectations and those that are conveyed from the writer's or speaker's perspective.

In this chapter, you will learn about the second element of devising a communication strategy: audience. After reading this chapter, you should know about the importance of considering your audience's knowledge, demographics, concerns, and interests; how to do so; and how to apply what you have learned in your communication practice.

On its face, audience analysis may appear to be a simple task. However, in practice it is often the most difficult task to carry out. People often have difficulty understanding the complex and sometimes nuanced differences of seemingly similar individuals. This difficulty may in part be caused by the strong ethos of individualism present in the culture of the United States. This emphasis on the individual can cause us to be *egocentric*, which means we may have difficulty empathizing with or understanding others' points of view. Learning how to see through another's eyes can be a difficult yet important skill in communicating successfully with others in the workplace as well as our personal lives. Without the ability to empathize with others and understand their views and feelings, we are unable to enact a dialogic model of communication.

When you are crafting important business messages or those to new audiences, you should analyze your audience or audiences. You can do so by considering a number of characteristics about your audience. These include:

- Its demographics, including age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education level, and regional culture, if appropriate.
- Its knowledge of your company, product, service, or the situation—the topics—you address in your message.

- Its interests in and attitudes about the topic of your message.
- Its concerns, reservations, or questions about the topic of your message.
- Its relationship with you, the communicator, and/or your company.

Your audience's preferences and characteristics should always guide the decisions you make regarding the creation and communication of successful business messages. The most successful messages construct win/win situations for both you and your audience; therefore, it is of critical importance to invest time in the analysis of your audience in order to achieve this goal.

AUDIENCE DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographics

Demographics is the statistical data about a particular population, including its age, income, education level, and so on.

For those of you who have taken courses in marketing, the term “**demographics**” is probably a familiar one. Marketing and business communication have a great deal in common, since both fields are generally concerned with sales or persuasion. Just as you should consider a potential market's characteristics before you can go about creating a successful marketing plan or campaign, you should also consider a potential audience's characteristics before creating a message that has the best chance of success.

For example, if you are marketing home health products to seniors, you would consider the preferences of older people regarding advertising media, distribution of the product, and pricing. In the selection of an advertising medium, for instance, you would be more likely to select the local newspaper for a senior market than for a product aimed at young adults. Older people are more likely to read the local newspaper than teenagers and college students.



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One issue to consider when analyzing an audience with which you will communicate is its demographics or its characteristics in regard to gender, age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, among others.

When crafting messages intended for an older audience, you would probably create messages with a more formal tone by avoiding the use of slang words. When considering visual presentation of a written message intended for older people, you might select larger font sizes to make the message more readable and illustrate the document with pictures of older people so that they can more easily identify with the message you are sending.

Our audience's ability to identify with the content of our messages should also be considered. As mentioned above, it is easier for people to identify with messages that contain photographs of people like themselves. Likewise, using examples and anecdotes that are easier for your specific audience to identify with or relate to can help to make your communication more effective. If you are writing messages aimed at persuading a female audience to purchase your company's automobile, for example, you would probably focus on the vehicle's reliability and safety. In contrast, if your audience is a male one, you might instead focus on the vehicle's performance as an attractive feature.

Your ability to provide the appropriate amount of information for your particular audience can affect your ability to fulfill your intended communication purposes, the first element of communication strategy discussed in Chapter 2: The Purposes of Business Communication. If you don't provide sufficient or relevant information aimed at meeting your audience's specific needs, you will be less able to fulfill your purposes of informing, persuading, conveying goodwill, and establishing your credibility. For these reasons, the elements of communication strategy are interdependent; they depend upon each other for the success of your messages.

Audience Knowledge

Your audience's knowledge about the topic of your message should be considered before crafting it. For example, if you are communicating to your co-workers about a product on which all of you have been working for the past six months, it is probably safe to use acronyms related to the product and your company, since you can assume that your audience is knowledgeable about the meanings of those abbreviations. However, if you are crafting messages for new customers, you should avoid the use of acronyms, since they are probably not familiar with their meaning. If you ignore this fact, your message will probably not be as successful in clearly communicating the information you intended.

Likewise, when communicating with audiences who lack knowledge of a product, service, or situation, you should provide more explanation or information. One common characteristic of inexperienced business communicators is that they are often unable to recognize the difference between their knowledge of a particular topic and that of their audience.

As stated earlier, your ability to provide the appropriate amount of information for your particular audience can affect your ability to fulfill your intended communication purposes. Without adequate or relevant information aimed at meeting your audience's needs and expectations, you are less likely to fulfill your purposes of informing, persuading, conveying goodwill, and establishing credibility.

Audience Interests and Attitudes

As discussed in the previous section, "Audience Demographics," providing information about which your audience is interested and to which it can relate, is one of the strategies of successful business communication. In an oral presentation, for instance, if you focus on information that does not address your audience's interests, you are likely to lose its attention and fail at your communication purpose. The examples and content you provide in an oral presentation aimed at college students should differ significantly from those you might use in a presentation delivered to college administrators and intended to achieve a similar purpose.

Likewise, it is important to consider the attitudes of your audience toward the topic of your message in formulating a successful communication strategy. If your audience is reluctant to agree with the content of your message or the position you present, you should give some thought to how to present your message in a way that might overcome this reluctance.

communication

One way of establishing credibility that is commonly used in popular media is through celebrity endorsements or *celebrity testimony*. Celebrity testimony is a statement made by a public figure known to the audience (Pearson et al, 2003, p. 436). Celebrity testimony has impact because we tend to identify with the people who are considered celebrities. In this regard, we see ourselves as having common ground with them.

Boon and Lomore's (2001) Canadian study of media figures as idols consisted mainly of actors (39 percent), musical artists (31 percent), athletes and dancers (15 percent), a few authors, and a number of other



Oprah Winfrey. In the study, one fourth of the young people reported that they “engaged in efforts to change aspects of their personality to bring it more in line with that of their favorite idol,” nearly 60 percent reported that “their idols had influenced their attitudes and personal values,” and nearly half reported “that their favorite idol had inspired them to pursue one or more particular activities or pastimes—generally those in which their idols engaged” (p. 445).

Identification between celebrities and their fans is a powerful source of credibility and influence on thoughts and

IN YOUR WORLD

celebrities, such as Bill Gates and

behaviors. However, such influence has its dangers, since celebrities may be used to endorse topics or products outside their areas of expertise.

Discussion

- 1. Who are the celebrities with whom you identify? Have you changed aspects of your personality, attitudes, or personal values to more closely mirror theirs?**
- 2. Have you been influenced to buy products or services because celebrities endorse or use them?**

One strategy is to think about the beliefs, values, or goals that you and your audience have in common. If you can begin your message by establishing agreement that you and your audience share the same interests or goals, you are attempting to show that you and your audience share some commonalities of belief that should reduce its resistance to the content and purpose of the remainder of your message. This strategy, which is referred to as establishing **common ground**, is generally effective in situations where your purposes include persuading and conveying goodwill. If you can focus your message on the benefits to your audience, you also are more likely to ensure a positive reception for your message. Again, this strategy is often used when your purposes are to persuade and convey goodwill.

Common ground

Common ground is the interests, goals, and/or commonalities of belief that the communicator shares with the audience.

Audience Concerns and Questions

You are not likely to be successful in attempts to persuade and convey goodwill if you do not effectively address your audience's concerns and questions. What is more frustrating than receiving a message that leaves you with many of your questions unanswered or your concerns completely ignored? Such lapses in

communication can negatively affect the relationship the communicator has with his or her audience, and his or her credibility. Such lapses can also negatively affect morale and productivity, both of which may impact a company's bottom line.

One of the biggest and most common concerns of business audiences is a lack of time. Most working people do not have enough time in their days to complete all the tasks that lie before them. Because of this problem, most businesspeople are challenged to find ways to do their jobs more quickly. One common strategy to make their use of time more efficient is to skim their written messages, whether delivered on paper or via e-mail.

One easy way to make your written messages more able to address your audience's concerns, at least regarding time pressures, then, is to make them easy to skim. To make written messages easier to skim, you should:

- Provide adequate “white space.” White space is the blank space left in your written messages. Not only does white space visually cue the reader to a new topic, i.e., paragraph, it also makes a document look easier to read because you have provided “entry points” into the document. A message consisting of five short paragraphs appears much easier to read than the same message delivered in one large paragraph. Generally speaking, paragraphs should be kept short—seven or eight lines at a maximum—in business messages.
- Begin each paragraph with an accurate topic sentence. Readers can quickly skim the first sentence to understand the content of each paragraph. They can then make a decision about whether they want to read more of that paragraph.
- Use headings, if appropriate. Headings are generally reserved for more complex documents, i.e., those that cover several topics and require several paragraphs to adequately address each one. The proper use of headings will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8: Visual Impression; however, it is important to remember that headings *do not* take the place of accurate topic sentences.



Identify an audience, an individual or group with whom you find it difficult to communicate. Describe the audience. What are its demographic features? What are its needs in the particular context that you communicate with it? Concerns? Expectations? How might taking these elements into consideration help you to communicate with this audience more successfully?

The Audience's Relationship with You

As discussed in Chapter 2: Purposes of Communication, an established, pleasant relationship with your audience can make successfully communicating with it much easier. As this chapter has addressed, you should also take into consideration your audience's concerns, interests, questions, and needs before

communicating. However, understanding the value of these activities and how to accomplish them can be a challenge for us because of our cultural values, our awareness of our effect upon others, and knowledge of power differences between people.

Culture From a communication perspective, cultures fall into two broad categories: collectivist or individualist. In fact, the individualism–collectivism continuum is thought by some scholars to be the most important dimension that distinguishes one culture from another (Hui & Triandis, 1986).

Individualist cultures

An individualistic culture is one with an “I” focus, and in which competition is encouraged, rather than cooperation, and in which individual achievement is highly valued.

Collectivist cultures

A collectivist culture is one in which cooperation is encouraged, rather than competition, and in which individual goals are sacrificed for the good of the group.

In **individualist cultures**, such as that of the United States, the autonomy of the individual is of paramount importance. Individualist cultures have an “I” focus in which competition, not cooperation, is encouraged; where decision making is predicated on what is best for the individual rather than the group; and individual initiative and achievement are highly valued (Samovar & Porter, 1995).

In contrast, in **collectivist cultures** commitment to the group is paramount. Therefore, these cultures prize cooperation rather than competition, individuals downplay personal goals in favor of advancing goals of the group, and privacy is sacrificed for the good of the group (Samovar & Porter, 1995).

All cultures have both individualist and collectivist tendencies, but one tends to predominate over the other (Gudykunst, 1991). The United States ranks number one in individualism. Venezuela is the most collectivist of countries, with Mexico, Thailand, Singapore, and Japan also ranking on the collectivist side of the continuum (Hofstede, 1980). Approximately 70 percent of the world’s population lives in collectivist cultures. (Triandis, 1990).

These findings are important to business communicators for two reasons: 1) In our global economy, it is helpful to recognize that some people with whom we will communicate think about the world differently than we do; and 2) even within the United States, we often work in groups of various sizes, including larger organizations, in which their values must take precedence if we are to successfully achieve our goals. In fact, if groups are to succeed, individual goals and agendas should be of secondary, rather than primary, importance. Table 3-1 below summarizes the characteristics of individualistic and collectivist cultures.

SUMMARY OF CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

Individualistic Cultures

Value individual freedom; place “I” before “we.”

Value independence.

Value competition over cooperation.

Value telling the truth over sparing feelings.

Examples: United States, Australia, Great Britain, Canada, Netherlands

Collectivist Cultures

Value the group over the individual; place “we” before “I.”

Value commitment to family, tribe, and clan.

Value cooperation over competition.

Value “saving face” by not causing embarrassment.

Examples: Venezuela, Pakistan, Peru, Taiwan, Thailand

TABLE 3-1. Summary of cultural characteristics.

Individualist and collectivist values do not always conflict. They can be deployed in tandem to create win-win situations for the parties involved. If a group is successful in achieving its goal, that success should extend to the individuals who were part of making it happen.

This understanding is implicit in the recognition of the importance of goodwill and our relationship with our audiences to the achievement of our communication goals. However, since we live and work in an individualistic culture, it is sometimes difficult to adjust to this differing approach to the world and communicating with others. It takes a focus on the “we” and the “them” rather than the “I,” although, as mentioned above, we generally can achieve our individual goals as well with an effective communication strategy and adequate communication skills.



Identify an audience from a different culture than your own. What cultural differences might affect the content of or your approach to a message intended for that audience?

Discrimination

A related issue is the development of an awareness of what constitutes discrimination. If we assume that others have the same experiences, beliefs, and values as ourselves, we suffer from what is called *ethnocentrism*. **Ethnocentrism** is the belief that your own cultural background, including ways of analyzing problems, values, beliefs, language, and verbal and nonverbal communication is correct. This belief can lead to an ignorance of and insensitivity to others, which, as has been discussed, can negatively affect your ability to communicate with others.

One result can be stereotyping. **Stereotypes** are generalized perceptions about certain groups of people or nationalities. These generalizations are often not useful for evaluating individuals, since they are prejudgments that are not based upon knowledge of a particular person. Therefore, these prejudices can damage your ability to communicate with specific individuals. Many prejudicial practices are also unlawful. Decisions based upon prejudiced views can be deemed discriminatory, and many states as well as the federal government have laws in place against discrimination based on race, age, ethnicity, religion, gender, and other characteristics. Language use can also be considered discriminatory or problematic in other ways. Telling off-color jokes in front of coworkers of the opposite sex can be seen as a form of harassment, which also can be considered unlawful.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own cultural background is correct, and that other cultures are somehow inferior.

Stereotypes

A stereotype is a generalized perception about a certain nationality or group of people.



What are some of the common stereotypes that you hold? Can you identify persons or situations in which those stereotypes do not hold? How might you gain more accurate knowledge about those persons you tend to stereotype?



Language can be used to exclude, denigrate, and discriminate against others. Language can also be used in more subtle ways that ignore or minimize the contributions of one sex in society. Such language use can be considered sexist and should be avoided in the professional workplace.

Some guidelines for avoiding sexist language use are provided below:

1. Replace *man* or *men* or words or expressions that contain either. For example, instead of *man* use human being, person, or individual.
2. Use gender-neutral terms when possible to designate occupations, positions, and roles. For example, instead of *businessman* use business owner, manager, executive, retailer, etc.
3. Refer to members of both sexes by parallel terms, names, or titles. For example, instead of man and wife use husband and wife. Rather than using men and ladies, use men and women.
4. Avoid the third person singular masculine when referring to an individual who could be of either sex. Instead of saying, "When a manager holds a meeting, he . . .", use the plural form of the pronoun when speaking generally, or the name of the person and the appropriate pronoun when communicating specifically. For example, "When managers hold meetings, they . . ." Or "When our manager, Ms. Johns, holds a meeting, she . . ."
5. Avoid language that disparages, stereotypes, or patronizes either sex. Avoid referring to adult females as *girls* or unmarried women as *spinsters* or *old maids*, for example. In addition, you should avoid terms such as *womanly*, *manly*, *feminine*, or *masculine* in ways that stereotypically associate certain traits with one sex or another.



Self-monitoring

As discussed earlier in this text, to be an effective communicator requires self-awareness and the ability to self-monitor to some degree. When you interact with others, it is helpful if you can be a participant as well as an observer in that process. In other words, you must be able to assume a detached view of yourself so that you can effectively perceive how others are responding to you, and adjust your communicative behavior if necessary to improve your ability to communicate with them. As discussed in Chapter 2, perception is an important part of communication because it affects the way we understand events, ourselves, and others.

The activity of observing ourselves in communicative situations is called self-monitoring. High self-monitors are those individuals who are highly aware of how others perceive them, while low self-monitors communicate with others with little attention to the responses they receive (Snyder, 1979). Impression management, or managing how others perceive us, can help us to achieve our goals through our communication practices, particularly in the image-conscious business world. When we use language that is appropriate for the occasion or situation, when we use nonverbal communication to demonstrate understanding

or empathy, and when we wear clothing that is within appropriate guidelines for the situation, we increase the likelihood that we will be viewed as credible and professional, which can better enable us to achieve our goals.

Some believe impression management is unethical or deceptive. Another view is that impression management is necessary for successful communication in specific situations. It relies on the ability to develop an awareness of the appropriate behavior, communication practices, and self-presentation for a particular occasion or situation and adjust to meet those expectations to better ensure successful communication outcomes.

Three essential types of communication are used to manage impressions. They include manner, appearance, and setting (Wiggins, Wiggins, & Vander Zanden, 1993). Manner includes both verbal and nonverbal communication. Manner, for example, might be seen as indifferent, silly, businesslike, intelligent, immature, friendly, warm, and gracious. Your appearance may suggest a role you play, a value you hold, your personality, or how important you view the communication setting. Setting includes your immediate environment as well as public displays of who you are (your car, your clothes, your jewelry). (Verbal and nonverbal communication elements are discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.)

You are responsible for the effectiveness of your communication, and this responsibility entails being able to view your communication practices from your audience's perspective. To be an effective communicator, it is important to be able to perceive how others see us as well as whether they are interpreting our words and actions as we intend and to adjust our communicative behaviors to ensure understanding.

Power

Some of those who believe impression management is always unethical or deceptive may be subconsciously reacting to another element often present in business communication situations: a difference in the power distribution within particular relationships. In other words, you may believe it is unethical to adapt your behavior to the expectations of differing situations. But such a view not only ignores the fact that such adaptation may be a sign of respect for the practices and people involved in that situation, it may also ignore the workings of power in such situations.

It is important to recognize the existence of differing power relations, since it can severely impair our ability to communicate effectively. Power differences are systemic; that is, they are built into systems. Power differences are endemic to most organizations, institutions, and societies. In other words, a hierarchy of positions exists in most of these entities; some people have more prestige, more power, and sometimes more responsibility than others.

Because of these differences, it is important to identify who has the power and what that power is in any particular relationship or situation, because it can affect

our choices and our ability to communicate effectively. One common error of judgment regarding power relations is that between an organization and its customers or clients. Many newcomers to an organization believe that the organization holds the power. However, that is not the case; without its customers or clients, an organization would cease to exist.

Being aware of differences in power is important, since being so may enable you to clarify your purposes for communicating. Is your intention to persuade your boss to see you as competent, or is it to undermine his or her effectiveness? You may not be aware of your intention for communicating, but your coworkers and perhaps your supervisor may. This knowledge can negatively affect your relationships with them as well as your credibility. In the end, it can negatively affect your ability to communicate to achieve your goals.



Identify a situation in which differences in power exist between the communicators. How do these differences affect the rules or expectations regarding how communication occurs in that situation? Have you seen instances where people failed to heed those rules or expectations? What was the outcome?

TYPES OF BUSINESS AUDIENCES

Business audiences are often quite different from those you may be familiar with in your academic experience. For example, most of your writing in school is probably intended for a teacher, who knows a great deal about the subject and who is required to read or listen to your message. However, this situation may not be true in the workplace. You may communicate with audiences who have little understanding of your topic, and it is very likely that you will write or speak to people who are not obliged to spend time reading or listening to your messages.

Another difference between communication in an academic setting and that in the workplace is that you may be communicating with a variety of people rather than a single person. If you are communicating with a number of people, they may have varying knowledge and needs. They may also differ in the strategies they use and skills they have for listening, reading, and processing information.

According to a typology devised by Olsen and Huckin (1991), in the workplace, you will generally be communicating with five types of audiences:

- Managerial.
- Non-expert.
- Expert.
- International or multicultural.
- Mixed.

Managerial Audiences

Managers are often the most important audiences you will communicate with, since they have decision-making ability and power over your future. According to Henry Mintzberg (1975), managers fulfill three types of roles that affect the way they communicate. These are *interpersonal*, *informational*, and *decisional* roles. The primary managerial role is interpersonal. Managers must lead and motivate a group of employees and often communicate with external audiences, such as suppliers, clients, and other departments. In this role, managers are also expected to disseminate information to these various audiences. Finally, managers must use information to make decisions that affect the various audiences with which they interact.

Because of the demands of these various roles, managers often have to deal with enormous time pressures. They have little time to listen or read carefully. Mintzberg's study found that 50 percent of the activities that executives engaged in lasted less than nine minutes. Many also treat message processing as a burden to be dispensed with as quickly as possible.

To ensure that your messages are received by managers, you can use a few strategies. For example, you can put key information up front where it is easily accessible. James Souther (1985) studied how managers read reports and found that all of them read the executive summary while most read the introduction, background, and conclusions sections. Only 15 percent read the body of the report. In general, managers look for the "big picture" and tend to ignore details.

Non-Expert Audiences

Non-expert audiences may be the most difficult to address, since they know little about a subject and will need more details. (Managers are also often non-experts, but they ignore details.) If you are communicating with a customer or client or perhaps a fellow employee from another department, you are probably communicating with a non-expert audience.

The problem with communicating with a non-expert audience is that you probably think like a specialist. That is, you may think about your topic differently than a non-expert and use different terminology than he or she might to discuss that topic. In addition, you may have difficulty identifying exactly what it is that a non-expert audience doesn't know, since you are so familiar with the topic.

As with managers, there are strategies you can use to communicate with non-expert audiences. These include:

1. Use a conventional mode of presentation.
2. Refer to common knowledge as much as possible without distorting the meaning of your message.

3. Provide an overview at the beginning of the document that explains what it is about and what it will cover.
4. Provide appropriate background information.
5. Include lots of definitions and explanations. For more complex concepts, you can incorporate examples, illustrations, and analogies to aid in clarifying their meaning.

Expert Audiences

Expert audiences are those who know as much about the topic as you do. Generally, expert audiences, who may be your peers, speak the same language as you do; that is, they understand the jargon associated with your profession. They also understand the same concepts, so you don't need to provide as much explanation and examples. In other words, they can fill in the gaps by making inferences about material that is common knowledge to both of you.

Strategies for communicating with expert audiences include:

1. Use standard technical terms.
2. Use a conventional format.
3. Emphasize data and display it in standard ways, using graphs, tables, equations, etc.
4. Make your points clear and easy to find.
5. Do not overstate your claims, since doing so may undercut your credibility.

International or Multicultural Audiences

The global economy and the growing diversity of the workplace mean that we will likely communicate with audiences whose first language may not be English and who have differing cultural interpretations of symbols and behaviors. When communicating with people whose first language may not be English, you should:

1. Avoid long or complicated sentences, since this may be more difficult for them to follow and comprehend.
2. Avoid slang, colloquial, or other idiomatic vocabulary uses. Such sayings as “in the ballpark,” “under the weather,” or “do an end run” may be interpreted literally by nonnative speakers of English, which will obviously cause confusion in terms of meaning.

Mixed Audiences

Even more difficult to communicate with are audiences who are composed of a variety of people: managers, non-experts, experts, and nonnative speakers or some combination of these. For example, you may be writing marketing literature that

will be read by experts, non-experts, and nonnative speakers, or speaking to a group composed of the same individuals. There are two strategies for dealing with mixed audiences:

1. “Layer” a written document so that different sections are aimed at different audiences.
2. “Democratize” your message so that all audiences can understand all parts of it.

An example of the layered approach is a formal report. Such a report might include an executive summary, background information, and recommendation sections aimed at managers, while the body and appendices contain the details needed by specialists who are charged with implementing the report.

However, if you are speaking to a mixed audience, you may wish to use the “democratic” strategy. In this case, you aim your message primarily at the most important audience, but you add information in appropriate places that is needed for understanding by the other audiences. Although this approach is similar to the “layered” one, it differs in that you add in examples, definitions, and explanations throughout the message that are needed for understanding by all audiences.

AUDIENCE-CENTERED MESSAGES

One of the most common manifestations of communication that does not take into account the needs, concerns, or interests of its audience is what is called **self-centered** communication. Although some of the reasons for self-centered communication might be attributed to cultural factors as well as developmental ones (i.e., the psychological maturity of the writer or level of self-awareness) another cause is our lack of awareness about our own message formulation process.

In the first draft of a document, for example, many of us write to ourselves in an attempt to figure out what it is we want to say. Such documents may begin without identifying a purpose or topic; in fact, in this process, we are often writing to identify the purpose or topic of our message for ourselves. In this stage of the writing process, beginning ideas may be general or abstract, or somewhat unrelated to the topic at which we eventually arrive.

In addition, such writing is generally not well organized. Paragraphs may cover several topics; they may lack topic sentences. But as we continue to write, we usually narrow our topic and then *voila!* We discover our purpose for writing. It is at this point that we may stop.

Much writing for school assignments, particularly essay exams, can often be described as self-centered writing. The writer begins to write about a general topic, perhaps making some detours along the way into related topics. In essay exams, the goal is often to get down on paper as many relevant ideas as

Self-centered

Self-centered communication is that which fails to take into account the needs, concerns, or interests of its audience.

possible—often in no particular order—to demonstrate to the teacher that you remember all the topics he or she discussed in class.

In this case, the teacher is required to read this jumble of thoughts, as it is part of his or her job, and interpret whether the jumble is adequate coverage of the topic. However, business people are not required to interpret such jumbles—they often don't have the time—and this is when it is important to recognize the difference between self-centered and audience-centered message formulation.

As indicated earlier, a self-centered message is generally the first draft of a document. The writer is writing to discover what he or she wants to say. In order to produce audience-centered writing, however, the writer must review the message to ensure that it contains the information that his or her reader needs to make sense of the message. In addition, the writer must ensure that the information is provided in a logical order and is easy to skim.

In self-centered messages, the main topic is often found at the end. As stated earlier, the writer—or speaker—may slowly narrow the topic, until he or she identifies the point he or she is trying to make. One of the first steps to create audience-based writing is to check whether the message should be turned upside down. Is the main topic or point at the end? If so, put it at the beginning of the second draft. Next, information that is not relevant to the main topic should be eliminated. Finally, what remains should be organized in a logical order and then proofread for correctness. (Creating well-organized messages will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5: Organization.)

Audience-centered

Audience-centered communication takes into account the needs, concerns, and expectations of the audience.

To achieve **audience-centered** messages, you should first identify your purposes for communicating; then ask what your audience's needs, concerns, and expectations are. These two steps are also the first in creating an effective communication strategy.

Résumés and application letters are excellent examples of the importance of audience-centered content and organization. Your planning for job application messages should always begin with analysis of your audience's needs, interests, questions, and concerns. Prospective employers want to know whether you can do the job they have to offer. To put it bluntly, they want to know what you can do for them. Employers are not offering jobs with the main objective of fulfilling your needs. Therefore, résumés and cover letters need to be focused on showing that you have the skills and experience for which they are looking. Employers want to know that you are the best-qualified applicant for the job.

The application letter below is a response to a job advertisement that asks for applicants who have a bachelor's degree in marketing and proven sales experience, as well as evidence of the ability to self-motivate. Ask yourself whether the letter focuses on providing the information an employer would need in making a decision about whether the writer is qualified for the position of customer service representative. How might the letter be improved?

FIGURE 3-1. Self-centered employment letter.

John Smith
234 Alabama St.
Worthy, TX 78000

January 5, 2005

Jane Summers
XYZ Parts Co.
Chicago, IL 30812

Dear Ms. Summers:

I am applying for the customer service representative position you advertised on the JOBLINE Web site. I believe the position will suit my personality and provide me the opportunities for which I am looking.

I am a fun-loving person who enjoys interacting with others. I believe the customer service position you are offering would enable me to meet a lot of new people. As the social chair of my fraternity, I excelled at creating fun ways for others to meet and interact.

I am looking for a position that will take advantage of my people skills and provide me opportunities for rapid promotion and pay raises. For those reasons, I believe your company will find me a good match for its needs.

Sincerely,

John Smith

In your analysis, you should have noticed that it is not apparent that the applicant knows what the job qualifications are, nor does the letter clearly state that the applicant has those qualifications. More specifically, it does not provide evidence that shows that the applicant has all the qualifications for which the employer is looking. Rather than focusing on discussing the issues in which the reader is interested, it addresses only what the writer enjoys and wants. This letter is an extreme case of a message that is self-centered rather than audience-centered. The letter below is a better example of an audience-centered message.

FIGURE 3-2. Example of an audience-centered employment letter.

John Smith
234 Alabama St.
Worthy, TX 78000

January 5, 2005

Jane Summers
XYZ Parts Co.
Chicago, IL 30812

Dear Ms. Summers:

I am applying for the customer service representative position you advertised on the JOBLINE Web site. I am well qualified for the position, since I have the experience, education, and personal characteristics you are seeking.

Continued on next page.

FIGURE 3-2. Continued

My experience working for Teltek Manufacturing as a customer service intern will enable me to quickly become a productive member of your team. At Teltek, I used my interpersonal skills successfully to make six sales after one month of training.

I will complete my bachelor's degree in marketing this May. My education has provided me much useful knowledge that I can apply as a customer service representative for your firm. My courses in marketing, customer service, and business communication have provided me an excellent understanding of sales techniques and practice in the communication skills necessary to satisfy your business clients.

I am hardworking and have excellent time-management skills. While taking a full load of courses, I worked part time or interned during my entire college career. I was still able to participate in the Student Marketing Organization, eventually being elected president, and to maintain a 3.5 cumulative grade point average.

I will call you in a week to make an appointment to talk to you in more detail about how I might contribute to the continuing success of XYZ Parts Co.

Sincerely,

John Smith

In this letter, the writer addresses the specific skills that will help him to perform the job of customer service representative. The writer goes a step further in stating how his skills will contribute to the company's goals. This strategy, which focuses on the benefits that the writer provides, is a common one in persuasive messages. Finally, the document's organization also attends to the reader's needs. The document is easy to skim, since it is organized in short, concise paragraphs that are devoted to a single topic. The most important information is also provided first, to emphasize it. Typically, relevant work experience is the most persuasive evidence a job applicant can present to employers. The letter ends with a proactive statement by the writer that indicates he has high interest in the job as well as initiative.

The considerations you should make to create written messages that are focused on meeting your audience's needs can also be applied to oral communication. Oral presentations should be well organized so that your topics and content are clear, and the presentation is easy for your audience to follow. Your content should also be of interest to and meet the concerns and needs of your audience. By addressing your audience's needs, concerns, and interests you are more likely to achieve your own communication purposes.



critical thinking

Do you write to yourself to discover what it is you want to write? If so, have you recognized that this is just the first draft and that you may now need to edit the document heavily for others to read? Have you read writing that was clearly written from the writer's perspective and did not consider the reader? What were your reactions?

3

chapter

Summary

- A second critical component of communication strategy formulation is the analysis of your audience or audiences. If your message is not tailored to meet the needs and expectations of your audience, it will likely not succeed in fulfilling its purposes. As simple as audience analysis appears, though, it can be difficult to perform effectively, because we often have difficulty understanding that others differ from us in many important and perhaps subtle ways. Because of the strong emphasis on the individual in United States culture, we may be egocentric, which means we have difficulty empathizing with or understanding others. To overcome this tendency, a systematic method for analyzing audiences exists. When analyzing an audience you should consider the following characteristics:
 1. Its demographics, including age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education level, and regional culture, if appropriate.
 2. Its knowledge of your company, product, service, or the situation—the topics—you address in your message.
 3. Its interests in and attitudes about the topic of your message.
 4. Its concerns, reservations, or questions about the topic of your message.
 5. Its relationship with you, the communicator, and/or your company. These considerations include the cultural background of the audience, attempts to avoid discriminatory behaviors or language, efforts to pay attention to the power relationship between you and your audience, and the effects of your self-presentation and behavior on others.
- Writing to business audiences differs dramatically from writing to an academic audience or teacher. Teachers are obliged to read your writing; they often are knowledgeable about the topic of your messages. However, this is not always true in a business setting, where people often face enormous time pressures. Because of these differences, you can use strategies to communicate more effectively with the various types of business audiences: Managerial, non-expert, expert, international or multicultural, and mixed.
- It is important to recognize the difference between communication that is aimed at meeting your audience's needs and that is formulated from the perspective of the writer or the speaker. In the process of developing a message, we often create messages that help us to solve a problem or decide what we want to communicate. It is important to remember that this message probably is not structured in such a way as to best meet your audience's needs; it may also fail to contain the information for which the audience is looking. It is important to understand your own process for formulating messages, so that you can take the necessary steps to create audience-centered communication.

KEY TERMS

- | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Audience-centered, 66 | Ethnocentrism, 59 |
| Collectivist cultures, 58 | Individualist cultures, 58 |
| Common ground, 56 | Self-centered, 65 |
| Demographics, 54 | Stereotypes, 59 |

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you are communicating with friends, what are their expectations regarding the content and delivery of messages that you convey to them, and how do you meet those expectations? How might you better meet their expectations?
2. When communicating with your parents, what are their expectations regarding the content and delivery of messages that you convey to them, and how do you meet those expectations? How might you better meet their expectations?
3. When communicating with your instructors, what are their expectations regarding the content and delivery of messages that you convey to them, and how do you meet those expectations? How might you better meet their expectations?
4. If you work or have worked part time, what have been the expectations of your supervisor regarding the content and delivery of the messages that you convey to him or her? How did you meet those expectations? How might you better meet them?
5. When you are applying for an internship or job, what are employers' expectations regarding the content and delivery of your employment messages? How can you meet these expectations?

APPLICATIONS

1. Using an Internet search engine, such as InfoTrac, identify an organization that was faced with a problem and needed to communicate how it was going to deal with that problem to various audiences who held different interests.
 - a. Identify each audience that held an interest in the decision.
 - b. Identify each audience's interests, expectations, beliefs, and concerns.
 - c. Assess the effectiveness of the organization's messages in meeting each audience's concerns and addressing them in a satisfactory manner.
 - d. In those cases in which the organization might have done a better job in addressing the audience's interests, explain how it might have better accomplished this task.
2. Your company is planning to announce a series of layoffs that will affect 10 percent of your employee population. Write an analysis that addresses the following issues:
 - a. What audience concerns and questions would you need to address to attain the maximal communication outcome?
 - b. To which purposes of communication would you need to attend?
 - c. At what type of audience would the message be aimed?
 - d. What would be the focus and content of your strategy to effectively communicate this decision to employees?
3. Using an Internet job search Web site, such as Monster.com, identify potential positions for which you might apply upon graduation. Review the job advertisements to identify the types of applicant qualifications and experience for which the organizations are looking. Choose one advertisement for which your skills best meet the organization's needs. Write an application letter that demonstrates that you understand the organization's needs and that you are qualified to fulfill those needs.
4. Identify a culture different from your own and using an Internet database, such as InfoTrac College Edition, research the beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices of its people. Write an essay in which you discuss these characteristics and compare them to those of your own culture. How

might these differences affect your communication with people of these cultures? What similarities do you hold that might provide opportunities for establishing common ground?

5. Interview a working professional in your intended field to discover how businesspeople's concerns, expectations, and communication practices differ



INFOTrac ACTIVITIES

1. Using InfoTrac College Edition, type in the words “audience analysis” in the keyword search engine. Visit some of the Web sites that you find to learn more about audience analysis.
2. Using InfoTrac College Edition, type in the words “demographic analysis” in the keyword

from those of college students. Write an essay that discusses the results of your interview and concludes with a list of goals you intend to pursue to adjust your communication practices—written, oral, and nonverbal as well as those involving the use of technology—to better meet the expectations of the professional workplace.

search engine. Visit some of the Web sites that you find to learn more about how demographics are used to identify audience needs and preferences.

Case Analysis

In 2004, Dell Computer decided to move its product support for business accounts from India back to the U.S. in response to customer complaints about the service they were receiving.

The year before, the Central Texas Better Business Bureau logged 3,726 complaints against Dell from consumers throughout the U.S. That was up threefold from 2001, a period in which Dell's sales volume grew two and a half times. In comparison, Hewlett-Packard earned only 1,362 complaints nationwide for that entire three-year period, according to the Better Business Bureau of Silicon Valley. In 2003, the Texas attorney general's office logged 504 complaints against Dell and Dell Financial, more than double the pace of 2002.

According to a 2004 article in *Forbes* magazine, the reason for much of the discontent had to do with language and cultural rifts between disgruntled U.S. customers and Dell's bright but unseasoned Indian support staff. Another frustration was the reported unwillingness of Dell employees to depart from a script during customer service calls.

Dell was among the first computer makers to route customer service and technical support calls to

India in an effort to cut labor costs. Dell set up its first center in Bangalore in 2001 and opened a second site in Hyderabad two years later. Complaints about Dell's telephone support from business customers began at that time.

M. D. Ramaswami, who helped establish Dell's Bangalore center, is proud of Dell's early hires. "We put them through eight weeks of training—four weeks around accent and culture and another four weeks around Dell products," says Ramaswami, who now runs his own consultancy in Bangalore. "The biggest challenge was working on the accent and culture. That challenge still remains—for all companies across the board."

Discussion

1. How might audience analysis have helped Dell executives avoid this problem?
2. What tools might have been used to conduct this analysis?

Adapted from an article written by Elizabeth Corcoran and entitled "Unoutsourcing: Dell Moves Product Support Back to US" that appeared in the May 10, 2004 edition of *Forbes* on page 50.

