



**Annual CPE Day for Accounting Alumni and Professionals | August 10, 2018**

***Are you a CPA? You better be an ACP! (A Communication Professional)***

***Tips on communicating with clients (and everyone else)***

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No matter what industry you're in or what your degree is in – you're in the communication business. Nobody wants “bad” communication, but what's the definition of good communication?

This session argues that you should have a strategic approach to communication just as you do for the rest of your business. Here are a few insights and tips to help you add ACP to your list of credentials. (Note, this is not the complete text book! Just a few things to think about.)

This insight began over 30 years ago after I left the White House where I was director of Media Relations for President Reagan. When I started my firm, Spaeth Communications, my first call was on SW Bell Telephone. They had just begun a program encouraging their employee to talk about the company to customers. The CEO turned to me and said, “We've discovered that the customer doesn't remember what we thought we told him.”

Most of us approach an encounter with a client or prospective client with the mindset, “What do I want to say?” or “What does he or she need to know?” Yet, when we ask, “How much does the listener remember from what you say, a lot or a little?” everyone knows – it's just a little! I left that meeting wondering if anyone had studied what makes a listener remember certain things and realized we could all be much more effective communicators if we understood that process.

That was our first day in business.

The second day, I had calls scheduled with the Baylor Health Care System and the national audit practice for Arthur Andersen. They both hired us – just based on our insight – but they gave us different assignments. Baylor needed to enlist all its internal constituencies as ambassadors. The challenge was to reach everyone, enlist and motivate them, equip them and then deploy them according to Baylor's business strategies. Arthur Andersen decided we had a seminal insight that they would invest in, but they wanted an analytical model and a methodology they could teach across their practice groups.

The first thing we did was map out communication as a tool for influence. We asked: who's the audience? What are you already producing to reach them? That's the formal network of communication. This includes website, PowerPoints, letters, emails and whatever else you control and pay for. It consists of anything your audience knows you created.

The informal network of communication is organized through the media and how you encounter your audience. It consists of anything your audience knows is from a third-party source. Social media – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the others – float around and can be categorized on both the formal and informal network.

But remember the most powerful form of communication is person-to-person verbal communication. Today, this is also what we call “video enabled;” that is, you’re talking to the other person through a camera, iPhone or iPad.

One of my favorite current examples is New York Times Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Nicholas Kristof. After one of his articles was published, he engaged his readership on Facebook Live. Kristof began by introducing himself and saying he wanted to talk about his column in the paper that day. As he spoke, readers were engaging in the comment section in real time. Think about this: he wrote the column and the paper published it in hard copy and online. Yet he still wanted to talk to us through the camera and interact with readers simultaneously. Why is a famous columnist doing this? Because – people don’t read. They glance and skim. Kristof knows he needs to interact with us on a one-on-one basis – which is what the camera gives us – to keep us interested.

What are the implications for you and the individuals and clients you advise? You need to think strategically about how you incorporate these new channels into your communication and you need to develop your skills to a very high level. Kristof does a good job talking “through” the camera rather than just “at” the camera. He’s a middle-aged male writer so this has to be a learned skill. If he can learn it, so can you.

Let’s take a step back to our model: the first task is to identify your audience. Good communicators aim to influence what their listener hears, believes and remembers. Two of the most powerful drivers of memory are words and statistics.

We pick up and repeat each other’s words. Our world divides into “good words,” the ones you want repeated and “bad words,” the ones you don’t want repeated. Once you’re sensitized to this, you’ll see the dynamic everywhere. You’ll also see that “bad words” are repeated more frequently and that the listener is more likely to remember negative words. Even worse, when you repeat and deny a negative word, the listener tends to overlook the denial and hear the opposite of what the speaker is trying to say. We call these BIMBO comments. Hear us out.

We named the genre for a young woman caught with a high profile, but married man. She held a press conference and announced, “I am not a bimbo,” thus causing everyone to think she was. We publish a monthly BIMBO Memo with the “best” BIMBO comments of the month as well as other timely lessons. It’s designed to be entertaining but it’s a serious teaching tool.

Your first task is to write out a list of all the “good words” you want your clients to say about you and the accounting profession – it should include words like professional, highly-trained, experienced...and more. Now to the list of “headlines,” a term with the same meaning in every language. A good headline is short, usually makes a claim and is easy to hear and repeat. (If you can’t listen to a headline and repeat it, that means it’s too long.) What do you want your client or prospective client to remember from this encounter? That’s your most important headline.

Headlines are supported by proof points – facts, statistics, examples, anecdotes and third-party quotes. Statistics can be strong drivers of memory, but they can also be very confusing. Remember to put them into context.

An example of the power of negative words plus statistics to confuse or mislead people can be found in a recent article in the New York Times, “The Children of Flint Were Not ‘Poisoned.” The article refers to the well-publicized controversy over the levels of lead found in the water in Flint, Michigan.

The two scientists who authored the piece argue compellingly that, while lead is not desirable and can be very harmful, the levels found in the Flint children’s blood was below the danger level. The article is stuffed with statistics. In the ‘70s, the average child had 14 micrograms per deciliter. Treatment is recommended only above 54 micrograms, but a “reference level” is 5 micrograms, although the percentage of Flint children above the reference level had only risen from 2.2 percent to 3.7 percent and the Flint water only had only 0.11 micrograms.

Are your eyes glazing over yet? The combination of jargon – “micrograms” and “reference level” – plus all the different kinds of statistics made for a thoroughly confusing argument. Coupled with the powerful word “poison,” the risk is that all one remembers is “poisoned.”

Now, apply this analysis to your discussion of accounting. We’re sympathetic, and we know the new tax reform bill is 2500 pages. To your client, it’s as confusing as the argument about how much lead is safe. That’s the key question. Is the water safe? Your clients want to know your version of this conclusion. Whether it’s taxes or business risk or some other analysis, what’s your conclusion or recommendation?

If you have to use statistics, pick the most important ones and make them “verbally visual.” In our trainings, we often use this example: during a discussion at an auto show, one of the commentators said he wanted to drive the new Ford truck which weighed 700 pounds less than the previous model. His colleague pointed out that it would be like taking a Harley Davidson motorcycle out of the flat bed of the truck. He painted a verbal picture of what reducing the weight by 700 pounds meant.

Next, let’s talk about style or delivery. There are five main elements of style: facial expression, eye contact, hand gestures, body language and voice quality. Let’s dwell on the first: facial expression. Very few people animate the face while speaking. Animation results from hand and arm gestures and an enthusiastic vocal delivery. But your encounter with your prospective client is interactive; you’re listening as much or more than you’re talking. Do you know what your face looks like while listening? It comes as a shock to many people because our faces tend to go slack. The risk is that the other person assumes you’re bored or don’t like them or don’t want to be there. Facial expression conveys that you like the other person. It’s directly related to the concept of likeability, a term coined decades ago for television anchors. If people think you like them, they like you. They tend to trust you. It’s one of the foundations of a relationship – which is what you want to build with your clients.

Notice, the advice isn’t to “smile.” Too many people interpret that incorrectly and the result is ghastly. We advise “lifting” the face, usually pulling the cheeks up. This pulls the lips up. Practice this with a friend video-recording you with their phone while you listen to a convoluted question. A tip is to remind yourself, “I like this person!” That usually triggers the appropriate facial expression. You don’t have to hold the expression, but you want to start with it.

It doesn’t matter if you’re discussing difficult matters. You can still convey that you like the other person. When Elizabeth Dole was Secretary of Transportation, we used to admire how she could visit a crash site and express condolences while still lifting her face.

A quick review:

- First question, who's the audience?
- Define effective communication as influencing what the audience hears, believes and remembers.
- Put together your lists of "good" and "bad" words to describe your work and the accounting profession.
- Create your headlines by asking what you want the listener or audience to remember.
- Prune statistics ruthlessly. And make them verbally visual.
- Get a benchmark of what you look like listening.
- Think about how to add direct-to-camera communication to your ongoing communication.

(Topics we didn't cover here: How to effectively use PowerPoint; turning presentations into TED level performances; how to experiment with social media; humor for beginners...and more. Check out our website for articles and free books to download at [www.spaethcom.com](http://www.spaethcom.com).)



Merrie has a unique background in media, government, politics, business and entertainment. She is a thought-leader in communication theory, executive training and coaching. Merrie is acknowledged as one of the most influential communication counselors in the world.

Merrie has coached thousands of executives who want to become more effective communicators, improve their presentation skills and ultimately expand their leadership capabilities. She gives clients a proven approach to communication and teaches them how to structure remarks and presentations to take their careers to a higher level. Her clients include Fortune 500 C-suite executives who have adopted the Spaeth approach for themselves and their global organizations as well as entrepreneurs, academic gurus, politicians and many others. Merrie was voted by the Dallas Business Journal as a “Change Maker” and was featured on the cover of DCEO magazine in 2013 with the headline “The Fixer.”

Merrie was a White House Fellow assigned to FBI Director William Webster. She then served two years as director of public affairs for the Federal Trade Commission, and in 1983, President Reagan appointed her as director of media relations at the White House.

Merrie writes regularly on communication topics, and her columns have been collected into two books, *Marketplace Communication* and *Words Matter*. Both books are available at [merriespaeth.com](http://merriespaeth.com). *You Don't Say!*, her most recent book, is available on Amazon and compiles communication mistakes from her popular monthly BIMBO Memo. She blogs regularly on [spaethcom.com](http://spaethcom.com).

A cum laude graduate of Smith College and a graduate of Columbia Business School, she is an instructor at Business Leadership Center of the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business where she teaches “Communication as a Strategic Business Tool,” “Influencing through the Power of Storytelling” and “Humor as a Leadership Tool.” She speaks on these topics and others to companies and associations in virtually every industry.