

Develop presentation to serve meeting content and audience

Because careless use can distort the message, the medium can become a communications problem, writer states.

By RICHARD CAVALIER

Not uncommon but always unsung are the heroics used to mask the technical production failure of a major business meeting. The specter of just such a technical failure haunts anyone who has responsibility for business meetings. However, the medium can fail but the product may survive on its merits.

At stake in industrial communications is an ivory tower pronouncement that "The medium is the message." It's difficult to imagine what kinds of studies — if deep enough to be meaningful — could have been so uniform and conclusive as to permit Marshall McLuhan to declare another scientific law.

To the contrary, research has increasingly pointed up the difference between the behavior of laboratory subjects and their real-world counterparts. People are — after all — the end point of Mr. McLuhan's dictum. The slogan, naked and unrestricted, is naive.

THE QUESTION is whether industry will overlook a breach of confidence such as a technical failure, and work rationally with communications in the future.

Because the medium can affect perception of a message and — carelessly used — can reshape it beyond recognition, the medium can become the communications *problem*. Industrial communication is an unnecessary dilemma for many today. As meeting techniques become more complex and more expensive, the messages are becoming harder to

find. That dilemma is eliminated when both the producers and their clients honestly distinguish between medium and message. When assigning relative importance to medium and message, there are only two alternatives, and their ramifications are easy to extend and compare.

Premise No. 1: The medium is the message.

Many audio-visual innovations were developed for the New York World's Fair to titillate mass audiences. Except where their role is identical in the corporate or association meeting room, the innovations are probably out of place. Others of the radical new techniques are essentially gimmicks. They get attention fast, but the transfer of interest to the message is only incidental, certainly not guaranteed and possibly not even measurable.

The man who sells remarkable equipment and splashy techniques will say that's no problem at all; and for a small (additional) sum he can show you the answer, more of the same. Call it *maxi-media* and shove the speaker aside. Everybody likes a circus — but nobody ever comes away with a message . . . unless it's P. T. Barnum's: *There's a sucker born every minute!*

THE HUCKSTER'S machine is his message — it's not yours. Don't blame the huckster. He believes in his machine — and when properly programmed, it might add to the spirit of your meeting. The huckster

often isn't aware that his medium is wrong for your message. Or perhaps — well, when you run a store, you sell what's on the shelf.

MAXI-MEDIA means mini-message in the current scheme of things — if not always, then too often. Maxi-media competes with message, like it or not. It can kill.

It's not that any particular medium — or even multi-media presentation — is a bad thing. Any medium, or any combination of media, can be evaluated only in terms of the contribution made to the clarity of your message; nothing else matters. Cost and beauty are secondary considerations, of little merit in themselves if the message fails to break through the trappings.

Multi-media production is today's programming fad. Like a corner office or a key to the executive washroom, the media are becoming status symbols for middle-management. Ready acceptance is a crutch — an excuse to bypass intelligent evaluation. This bypass is the wrong route. Fad or not, multi-media isn't new as a program segment. It hit the staid world of associations as an *integral part* of the annual conventions of both the Linen Supply Assn. of America and the Steel Service Center Institute as long ago as 1960.

Integrated multi-media production concepts were developed to support those several-day programs because no single medium would do the whole job. That is still the

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criterion used by confident meeting planners.

Premise No. 2: The message is the message.

Meetings have three distinct components: content, presentation, and audience. Presentation techniques — media — are the only really flexible element, and they must be developed or bent to serve the other two.

The reason is simple — conviction is an effect of empathy, rapport, and confidence in the speaker and his message. Whatever enhances the stature of the speaker enhances his message; whatever minimizes or distracts from the speaker steals from his message.

Consider the program element independently:

Content: The message to be conveyed must be comprehensible to the people who will act on it; and therefore it must be:

1) Planned and constructed rationally;

2) Thought out to explore major ramifications;

3) Phrased concisely and explicitly; and

4) Presented in a manner conducive to listening, inter-acting, and learning.

Audience: They're the reason the meeting was called. They want to gain from the experience, to understand and react, to feel that their participation matters. They resent being talked down to, to getting bromides in medicine bottles, to seeing money wasted on trivia when they need new tools, bigger budgets or smaller membership fees, and even higher personal income. If a meaningful message is delivered in their language, they will listen and respond. Ideas beget enthusiasm.

Presentation: Because people still identify only with people, the most convincing manner of presentation is still a capable speaker. A featured motion picture or a sociodrama is, in this context, an effaced speaker. Most speakers choose to use visual aids to capture excess brain power — everyone knows retention is highest when both eye and ear are engaged. In small groups, a speaker can deliver a message informally, using printed handouts, charts, and/or cels generated on the overhead projector. In large groups, especially with technical material, visual aids are required to conserve time, magnify small items, and deliver identical concepts or images to everyone.

PRESENTATION techniques must

serve the learning process. Prominent educators and industrial trainers have made significant contributions toward practical application of teaching/learning principles.

"Entertainment has as its goals satisfaction and pleasure in the present moment; adult education's goal is dissatisfaction and change.

Entertainment establishes a relationship of one-way flow of communication from transmitter to receiver; adult education relies heavily on dynamic interaction among the learners and between learners and teachers," Malcom Knowles writes.

"Transmission of learning is made possible only if other elements such as past experience, present motivation, and effective state of the learner provide an appropriate ground to close the sign/symbol circuit by which communication is effected," according to James W. Brown and James Thornton Jr. (See bibliography for further readings.)

How different the emphasis when education — not entertainment — is the fix of a business meeting! And is it shocking that people give different values to comedians, family and jobs? Presentation techniques — machines or people — which exceed the teaching/learning requirements of the speaker and his message are *packaging*.

Packaging is nice. It fills in gaps and lends a pleasing continuity to program segments. Properly used, it helps a poor speaker look professional. Packaging is no substitute for message, and it is highly dispensable.

To evaluate your program's production plan, price the educationally-required visual/live segments separately from the packaging materials. Work only with a producer who understands your message. Unfortunately for the meeting planner who wants to escape responsibility, meeting plan evaluation is not subjective: it's a matter of applied educational principles.

Even at today's prices, a few thousand dollars will buy respectable program components; and \$10,000 per hour will buy an elaborate program, professionally produced, complete. You decide whether the benefits of the packaging are real or imaginary at the prices quoted by your producer.

Through it all, keep a sense of perspective. A superspectacular media show might look good compared to one staged by a personal or divisional rival; yet compared to other promotional tools that could

have been bought with the same packing money, it can be a dog. Management's increasing insistence on take-home information/training kits is tacit acknowledgment that a belly laugh is not necessarily gut involvement.

How much product must be sold at current profit ratios to pay for \$100,000 worth of mishap on stage? When \$100,000 is invested in an off-Broadway show, the backers have a fighting chance to win it back — multiplied! Industrial management wants the same opportunity: A business program talking business language to businessmen. That requires a message, training followup, and value-received . . . so a product can be sold more efficiently, more profitably.

Isn't that what a business meeting is all about? ■

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(Mr. Cavalier is a free lance writer)