

Effective Communication

Communicating effectively—or—"How's that again?"

■ PHILIP D. SPIESS

I think you will all agree that anyone in the right of way profession must be a good communicator. All right of way people—planners, administrators, negotiators—spend most of their time talking or writing—i.e., in explaining or discussing; questioning or answering; listening or pleading; arguing, persuading, or convincing. Thus, the right of way person's skill in handling people (superiors and peers, subordinates and outsiders)—that is, in getting all of these people to do what the right of way practitioner wants them to do—is so much a matter of what he or she says or puts into a letter that the ability to communicate effectively is of paramount importance.

Allow me to use the word "agent" for anyone engaged in right of way work. The *American Heritage Dictionary* of the English language defines an agent as: (1) "One that acts or has the power to act;" (2) "One that acts for or as the representative of another;" and (3) "A means or mode by which something is done or caused." Therefore, planners and administrators are, in a sense, as much agents as the field negotiators are. They are part of the "means" by which our work is accomplished.

Actually, no agent has trouble communicating, for every word, letter, and act—indeed, every tone—communicates some-

thing. The problem lies in communicating effectively, in achieving the results we want our communications to bring.

Henry Scherman once wrote an instructive book on economics entitled: *The Promises Men Live By*. What interested him was the extraordinary number of times we either do or fail to do certain things simply because we rely on someone else to do or not to do something. For example, you give instructions to a subordinate, or explain a concept to an associate, or describe a procedure or a proposed agreement to a property owner. You leave, feeling that all is clearly understood, only to discover later (usually to your regret) that what you said or wrote was not understood at all.

What interests me, however, is the number of such misunderstandings that arise, not so much from mistaken expectations, but more likely because our language is confusing and imprecise, or our spelling is bad, or our pronunciation is poor, or the connotations of our words (that is, the meaning and purpose we intend them to convey) leave something to be desired.

All of us can learn from the mistakes of others—the radio and TV commentators, newspaper people, politicians, ministers, even educators—who are experts at putting their feet in their mouths.

Politicians and political agencies are particularly adept at this. For example, a man dialed a phone number listed for the state of Louisiana. A woman answered by stating the name of her agency. There was silence for a moment. Then the man asked, "How's that again?" She repeated, "This is the Governor's Office for Elderly Affairs." "For gosh sakes, sign me up," the man replied. "I didn't do too good even when I was young!"

Thirty-eight years of right of way work have convinced me that a good communicator needs to know only a few things—

but he or she must know those well. Good face-to-face negotiations, or good, clear letter writing, is primarily a matter of attitude. No matter how much grammar an agent has mastered, no matter how much information he or she has on the subject under discussion, no matter how much experience—without the proper attitude, that person will never be a good communicator.

Effective communication is primarily a matter of attitude: adapting to the recipient

You have to care about what you say or write, and how you say or write it, if you want it to be received in the way you intended. As Hallmark says: "When you care enough to send the very best." And that attitude is what I call "Adaptation"—the ability to fit the tone and structure of your communication, either oral or written to the hearer or reader.

Of course, adaptation is not enough. The good communicator must also exercise sound judgment. And to reflect his judgment, both as to the subject and the receiver, he/she must have control of his/her medium. That is, he or she must be able to speak or write clearly, precisely, and effectively.

To do otherwise not only fails to deliver the message one had hoped to convey, but often becomes ridiculous as well. Here, for example, is a Health Bulletin of the United States Army: "Persons experiencing chest pains, severe leg cramps, extreme shortness of breath, or excessive fatigue should neither be required nor encouraged to complete the march. Persons experiencing these symptoms should be carefully watched until they have completely disappeared." You bet! Otherwise the Army loses track of a lot of people!

I once had an employee who asked me: "Why, when I've studied composition in grade school, high school, and college, do you always edit my letters? The words I use in a business letter are the same as those I have always used in other kinds of writing." Well, it was a legitimate question and a legitimate point. For it is true that the words, aside from a few technical terms, perhaps, are the same. It is even true that

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the literary standard of business writing is not as high as in a personal essay, but there is a fundamental difference between business letters on the one hand and all forms of "pure literature" on the other.

The difference between speaking or writing, solely for pleasure or self-satisfaction and negotiating an easement, for example, is the same as the difference between just expressing oneself and speaking or writing to influence others. In business, speaking or writing is a *means*, not an *end*.

If you find yourself admiring the turn of a phrase you have just voiced or written, instead of thinking about the effect on the listener or the reader, then you are probably doing a poor job of communicating. Your hearer or reader may be admiring that phrase too, but may not be aware of the message you were trying to convey.

So let's look at a typical negotiating session, or a typical business letter. Break either one down into its elements, and you will find three essential ingredients: (1) Judgment; (2) Adaptation to the reader or listener; and (3) the Medium.

Judgment, I believe, is by far the most important of these ingredients. It is to speaking or writing what flour is to cake. Business judgment, whether spoken or written, equals common sense *plus* experience *plus* an inherent, intangible aptitude that varies greatly from individual to individual. Judgment, in speaking or writing, may be defined as knowing when to do—or when to say—what.

No mastery of psychology, no correctness of grammar, no beauty of phrase can compensate for lack of judgement.

No mastery of human psychology, or correctness of grammar, no beauty of phrase can compensate for lack of judgement. There is no point in merely being persuasive unless you are able to persuade your hearer or reader to do what it is you want him or her to do; no point in wasting faultless phrasing on some spiel if it will not perform the specific function you want it to.

Every discussion with members of the public for rights of way are made either to an individual or to a group of persons; every letter for the same purpose is written to be read by an individual or a group of persons. This fact may seem to be so obvious and elementary that to even mention it seems ridiculous. But the truth is, the disregard of this simple fact is the most common cause of the failure of the discussion or letter to bring about the desired result.

How easy, when talking or writing to prospective grantors, to think primarily of our agencies' needs, costs, goals, and adjustments, rather than the way our project may affect those grantors. But we must remember that those prospective grantors are concerned primarily with their own welfare and not with ours.

Nevertheless, our negotiations—oral or written—do explain the goals and needs of our agencies or companies, do calm ruffled feelings, do pave the way to closings, do get the job done. They do all these things when the agent is able to submerge his or her own ego and, in imagination at least, adopt the point of view of the hearer or reader. So we must constantly feel our way into the thoughts and emotions of the persons with whom we deal. Ideally, we must identify ourselves with those persons.

And that is "Adaptation." In its finer phases, it involves an accurate focusing of our message, both in content and in tone, on a specific person or group of persons. So, before you make the call or write the letter, try to visualize your contact. Imagine how you are going to approach him or her, how you will adapt your words, spoken or written, to the human being before you.

But however sound your judgment, however acute your adaptation to your "customer's" point of view, your *words* are the neck of the bottle through which your judgment and your adaptation must pass. Your words, therefore, are the "Medium" by which you sell your project. Thus, if the words are poor, your "client"—or "customer," if you will—may only get a jumbled, half-formed idea of what your communication is all about.

To illustrate, a radio or a TV set is the Medium between us and certain waves in the air. If the instrument is a good one, then we have good reception, and we are unaware of the set—the Medium itself. But if the set crackles or sputters, or distorts the sound or the picture, then our attention is drawn to the set—the Medium—and we

lose track of some of the program we wanted to hear or see.

And that's just the way it is with our communications. When we listen to a good communicator, or read a good letter, we are unaware of the Medium. We are conscious only of the message. Hence the necessity for what I call the "Three C's of the Medium:" (1) Clearness or Clarity, (2) Conciseness, and (3) Correctness. First, Clarity to ensure that the hearer or reader understands the message. Second, Conciseness to avoid making him or her conscious of the mere words as such. And third, Correctness to prevent him or her from being confused and thereby diverted from the train of thought we want our message to set up.

Your words are the medium through which your judgement and adaptation to your recipient must pass.

But these three factors—Clarity, Conciseness, and Correctness—are not virtues in and of themselves. Indeed, carried too far in normal conversation or in an ordinary business letter, they might even become defects.

An affectedly pedantic correctness could attract attention to itself and away from the message. For example, an agent calling on miners in West Virginia or Kentucky who went about saying "I-ther" or "ni-ther" instead of "either" and "neither" would quickly find the Medium interfering with the message.

And the person who talks or writes merely to impress rather than to persuade is likely to be a victim of sesquipedalianism—the inclination to use long words. Indiscriminate users of big words hurt only themselves by their failure to make themselves understood. Some speakers or writers, however, use big words deliberately, usually with the intention to deceive by mystifying. For example, here's a nice piece of deception in a report of a dubious mining company to its stockholders: "Results of the test drillings made in the — Lake Field are not altogether in consonance with the expectations of the engineers in charge of the development." The translation in

plain English is: "We wasted a hell of a lot of your money in drilling dry holes at — Lake."

Educators are particularly fond of such pretentious and evasive gobble-dygook. In Washington, D. C., a teacher's note on a report card read: "Johnny is especially adept in the creative use of visual aids for the enhancement of his apparent progress in learning." The confused parent phoned the teacher for the interpretation of that exotic statement. The teacher explained: "He copies from the kid in the next seat!"

There are two aspects of words that must be considered in discussing effective communications—Correctness and Connotation—for they are essential parts of the medium. If we say: "The man arrived in a conveyance," that could mean anything from a wheelbarrow to a Cadillac. So in order to be effective, we should use words that are precise and phrases that are capable of creating a particular image in the mind of the recipient.

**Clarity, conciseness,
correctness, and
connotation must be
tempered with judgment.**

But concrete words can do more than merely create images. They may appeal not only to the visual sense, but also to the gustatory (or tasting) sense, the olfactory (or smelling) sense, the auditory (or hearing) sense, or to the tactile (the touching or feeling) sense.

However, even being concrete or specific can still lead to trouble if you do not choose your words with care. For example, my wife has a friend who is a constant dieter, so far without success. One day, about to give up in disgust, she asked her husband: "Which would you rather have—a skinny, grouchy wife—or a fat, jolly one?" The fight started when he replied: "Just how fat do you have to get before you become jolly?"

But back to the basics. In addition to their denotative meanings—that is, their central or basic meanings—words also have connotative meanings—that is, fringe or acquired meanings.

To illustrate, we can compare such a

word to a snowball that some children have rolled down a hill. The small core of the snowball that the children fashioned with their hands corresponds to the original meaning—or the denotation—of the word. But the successive layers of snow that the ball acquired in its descent corresponds to the acquired meanings—or the connotations—of the word.

Each discipline of the right of way profession has its own language consisting of words that are generally devoid of connotation. Engineers, appraisers, lawyers, realtors, highway experts, railroad people, telephone people, electric and gas transmission people, negotiators all have their own language—particular words or phrases that are peculiar to that discipline. Those exact and objective words and phrases may almost be termed "scientific" in that they are so specific in their usage. But those explicit, or "scientific" words, if you will, have never escaped to general public use and are therefore devoid of connotation. That is how we would like to keep them.

For example, as long as the word "chlorophyll" was used only by botanists and biologists, it had a precise denotation. Whenever a scientist used it in a speech or paper, he or she knew it would be interpreted exactly as intended. Then along came an opportunistic chemist who used chlorophyll as a deodorizer. So for millions of people today, the word chlorophyll has the connotation of a deodorizing agent, whether in toothpaste or dog food. Thus, chlorophyll no longer refers precisely to that extraordinary catalyzer upon which we all ultimately depend for our very being.

There is, of course, no reason to avoid the use of such specific or scientific words in conversation or in a business letter—*provided* that they are relevant to the general theme of the conversation or letter—and *particularly provided* that the recipient of the communication is familiar with them. For example, a talk to a group of machine-tool manufacturers, or a letter to a machine-tool company or its customers, is likely to be filled with terms unfamiliar to the general public.

On the other hand, unfamiliar terms, those peculiar to a specific discipline, should be avoided in communications with members of the general public or any non-technical person. Lacking connotation, the unknown word or phrase can have no favorable effect and may even confuse, and thereby alienate, the hearer or reader.

However, of the words that do have con-

notations, it is still hazardous to arbitrarily classify any of them as having either good or bad overtones, for individual words are still pretty much at the mercy of the fates. Their connotations may change from good to bad, or from bad to good, overnight. Consider the storekeeper who examined his stock on the day after Pearl Harbor. Finding most of it marked "Made in Japan," he was a sad man indeed.

So we in right of way must be extremely careful in the selection of the words we use in talking or writing to outsiders or non-professionals. For example, it is undesirable to use the word "claim" in conversation or in a letter, except in the quite proper technical phrase: "to file a claim." But to say or write: "The damage which you *claim* was done by our construction crews" is to run the risk that the word will be given the connotation of "*falsely claim*." The person who hears or reads such an expression will probably assume that the speaker or writer is skeptical about both the damage and the claimant's veracity. The fact that the speaker or letter writer had no such idea in mind at all does not alter the recipient's indignant reaction.

Of course, in a face-to-face situation, we can catch the reaction and take steps to correct the wrong effect our words have produced, but letters pose a different problem. After all, if we could accompany each letter to its destination in order to ensure its proper interpretation, we probably would not need to write the letter in the first place. Therefore, it is your imagination that must make the journey to the addressee, sit down in his/her chair, and interpret the letter as he/she would interpret it. You must put yourself in the other person's place; you must listen with his/her ears; you must see through his/her eyes.

Even when we think we are making ourselves especially clear, our words can still be misinterpreted. A few years ago, an executive friend of mine tried unsuccessfully to get some information about a shipment he had sent to a small western town via Railway Express. In his third letter to the Express Agent, one John Smith, he wrote in exasperation: "If I do not hear from you about this matter by return mail, I shall report you to your superior!" A few days later, back came a letter with this letterhead: "John Smith, Railway Express Agent—Smith's Laundromat—Smith's Clothing and Novelties—Smith's Grocery and Delicatessen—John Smith, Ford Dealer." Mr. Smith began his reply: "Dear

Mr. Ahrens: I have no superiors—and damned few equals!”

For more on exasperation, consider the case of F. D. Brown, whose ad appeared on a Monday in the Cedar Rapids, Iowa, *Express*. The ad read: “For Sale. F. D. Brown has one sewing machine for sale. Phone 758 after 6 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Smith who lives with him cheap.” A correction in the same newspaper on Tuesday read: “Notice. We regret the error yesterday in F. D. Brown’s ad. It should have read: ‘One sewing machine for sale. Cheap. Phone 758 and ask for Mrs. Smith who lives with him after 6 p.m.’” Same newspaper on Wednesday: “F. D. Brown has informed us that he has received several annoying phone calls because of the error we made in his classified ad. his ad stands corrected as follows: ‘For Sale. F. D. Brown has one sewing machine for sale. Cheap. Phone 758 after 6 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Smith who loves with him.’” Newspaper ad on Thursday: “I, F. D. Brown do NOT have a sewing machine for sale. I smashed it. Do not call 758 as the telephone has been taken out. And I have not been carrying on with Mrs. Smith. Until yesterday, she was my housekeeper, but she quit!”

But some words undergo a complete revolution in their connotation over a period of time. As late as the 1850s, for example, the word “woman” had very undesirable connotations. The respectable term was “lady.” Then, with the spreading of democracy, every female member of the race became a “lady,” including the “saleslady,” the “scrub lady,” or the “cleaning lady,” and the “sewing lady.” So then “woman” became the more dignified term.

Body language, as well as words, are important elements of connotation.

As to connotations, the automobile industry discovered early on that few people were willing to buy “second-hand” cars. “Second-hand” had an undesirable connotation for the typical member of the American middle-class. But some years ago when Buick quipped that “Every car on the road is a used car,” the prejudice against what were actually “second-hand” cars was removed, and the shift was made to “used cars.” Today, Madison Avenue has gone

one step further, and they are now called “pre-owned cars.”

The auto industry ran into another connotation problem when it began to tap the middle- and lower-class markets by selling on the “installment plan.” But the term “installment plan” had strictly lower-class connotations, and no member of the middle-class would be caught dead buying anything on the “installment plan.” So such phrases as “easy payments,” or “deferred payments,” or “convenient financing,” or “extended financing” were introduced, whereupon, ultimately, millions of the middle-class bought automobiles—on the “installment plan.” Today, most of us don’t buy our cars through a lending institution or a finance company. We buy cars through an “acceptance corporation.”

Another kind of connotation is “body language”—communicating without even saying a word. The look on the face, the way we sit, or fold our arms, or cross our legs all carry some connotation. That is, these movements convey a particular message, perhaps approval or disapproval, perhaps disagreement or unbelief, either intentional or unintentional, either consciously or subconsciously.

Anyone with a reasonably sensitive ear, even a slight command of the language, and some imagination can unerringly tune out a word that would have a bad connotation for the hearer or recipient. But to select the word or phrase that will have the *most favorable* effect is less easy.

It is not an exaggeration to say that “every talk or conversation is a sales pitch” or that “every letter is a sales letter,” for these are the basic principles of modern business communications. Every conversation with our clients, and every letter to our customers, is an effort to sell them on some idea, some project, some plan, some concept. According to these principles, then, all talks, all conversations, all negotiations—indeed, all letters—should be so conceived and so worded as to bring a favorable reaction from the hearer or reader. In talking “cold turkey” or in cold print, that sounds and looks like ordinary horse sense. But even a casual examination of a typical negotiating conference or business letter reveals that a startling number fail to conform to these basic principles.

Of course, with regard to accuracy of aim, our oral or written “sales pitches” differ greatly. If we are talking to a large group or sending a letter to a list of 500 names, then we can use the “shotgun” ap-

proach. We can only point in the general direction of our multiple target with the hope that the scattering shot will find the mark here or there.

But at the other extreme is the “sharp-shooter” approach, directed to an individual target, or in response to a specific inquiry. The communicator then adapts his/her “selling points” to the particular needs of the person with whom he/she is communicating. Furthermore, he/she may even strategically adapt his/her general approach and tone to what, judging from the individual or the inquiry, he/she thinks is the psychological make-up of that person. Having only one target at the moment, he can afford to take accurate aim with a telescopic sight!

The classic sharp-shooting reply to a question was provided by Air Chief Marshal Lord Dowling, the architect of the strategy used by the RAF Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain. At the end of a lecture he gave at the U.S. Air Force College, a rather smug American officer asked: “If the Germans had concentrated on neutralizing RAF bases instead of attacking population centers, might not the outcome of the war have been different?” Fixing the questioner with a withering stare, Lord Dowling replied: “My dear fellow. If your uncle had been plumbed a bit differently, he might have been your aunt, mightn’t he?”

To sum up: Pay attention to spelling and pronunciations. Concern yourselves with grammar and attitude. Be precise. Have complete information on your subject and be able to convey it. Adapt your communications with sound judgment. Be clear, concise, and correct. Where applicable, use specific words and phrases. Understand both the positive and negative connotations of words. Know when to use the “shotgun” or the “sharp-shooter” approach. You must do all these things to be a good communicator—and by good, I mean effective.

In my experience, few right of way deals are closed with only one call or one letter. Therefore, you must concentrate on establishing rapport with your contacts, because each call, each letter, leaves a particular impression. Your words, your tone of voice, your facial expressions—indeed, even your movements—all contribute to the image that your contact has of you and to the effect your message has on him or her. And there is a cumulative effect of these impressions that can be either positive or negative. (IRMA)