

## The Sweet Spot: Find It, Hit It

**Q: How do you provide such incredible service at such an amazingly low price?**

**Q: How can I find out about other products you're sure I'll want?**

**Q: How do I sign up for more of your excellent newsletters?**

We've all seen Frequently Asked Questions files like these—transparently self-serving marketingese masquerading as genuine information. They're about as far as communications can get from the sweet spot: the place where the interests of your organization and your audience meet. Few things miss quite so badly as fraudulent FAQs, but parsing the extreme example illuminates why communications often fall short of the mark.

**Unreality bites.** People generally have a nose for BS, and a failure to be real can come back to bite you. Making up questions we wish people would ask is a species of bad-faith communications with many relatives—overpromising, making extravagant claims without support, using generalizations to hide a lack of substance. Even if these strategies work once or twice, they'll eventually leave a sour taste in everyone's mouth.

**Relevance is in the eye of the beholder.** And the beholder is your target audience, not internal stakeholders. This may be the most common cause of communications misfires, and the most difficult to overcome.

Communications staffs sometimes feel (sometimes correctly) that they are judged more by how much materials appeal to insiders than by how well they engage the target audience. And internal experts often find it difficult to get beyond their own perspective. The classic example is product information focused on complex technical innovations that engineers find fascinating—but nontechnical buyers find boring and befuddling. This can work in the opposite direction, too: points that seem trivial to insiders can impress your audience.

Despite the challenges, it's worth fighting the relevance battle—if you want to reach people, you have to talk

about what they care about.

**Make friends—influence people.**

As Dale Carnegie essentially said, listen to people and they'll find you fascinating. That holds true for companies and their customers. Phoniness and navel-gazing certainly communicate disdain for the audience, but perhaps nothing is worse than disinterest.

Communications often fail because communicators fail to get to know their audience. Our work would be much easier if we could just focus on what's interesting to us and what we want people to know, but audiences want to feel like we know them, not like we're instructing them. Actually asking members of your target audience what they care about—and responding to their answers—may be the single most important thing you can do as a communicator.

All this may sound like a prelude to the maxim "it's not about you," but that's only partly true. There's something about what you do that's also about your audience, or you wouldn't be in business. Find it and express it, and you'll hit the sweet spot. ▀

### Stay Out of Project Management Hell

**We've all been there: for whatever reason, a communications project stalls, and before you know it, you've lost so much momentum that it's difficult to rekindle the spark. But there are ways to keep the fire lit.**

**Keep going forward.** When one area gets hung up, don't let that stop movement along other fronts. And don't hesitate to ask for help in removing the snag.

**Keep your team informed.** Provide regular updates on project status and when you expect to restart. This keeps the project from dropping completely out of sight (and out of mind). Stakeholders should be kept in the loop as well.

**Look for new opportunities.** A hiatus of several weeks or more may give you the chance to revisit the project. You may be able to improve it or take advantage of opportunities that you didn't see before.

Of course, you'd just as soon avoid holdups in the first place. When planning your project, identify potential bumps in the road, and do all you can to smooth them out before you start. And create a realistic schedule that has some give for steps that may take longer than you'd like.

Finally, remember that shortcuts make long delays—don't be tempted to cut corners or skip steps. In communications work, as in most things, oversights have a way of coming back to haunt us. ▀