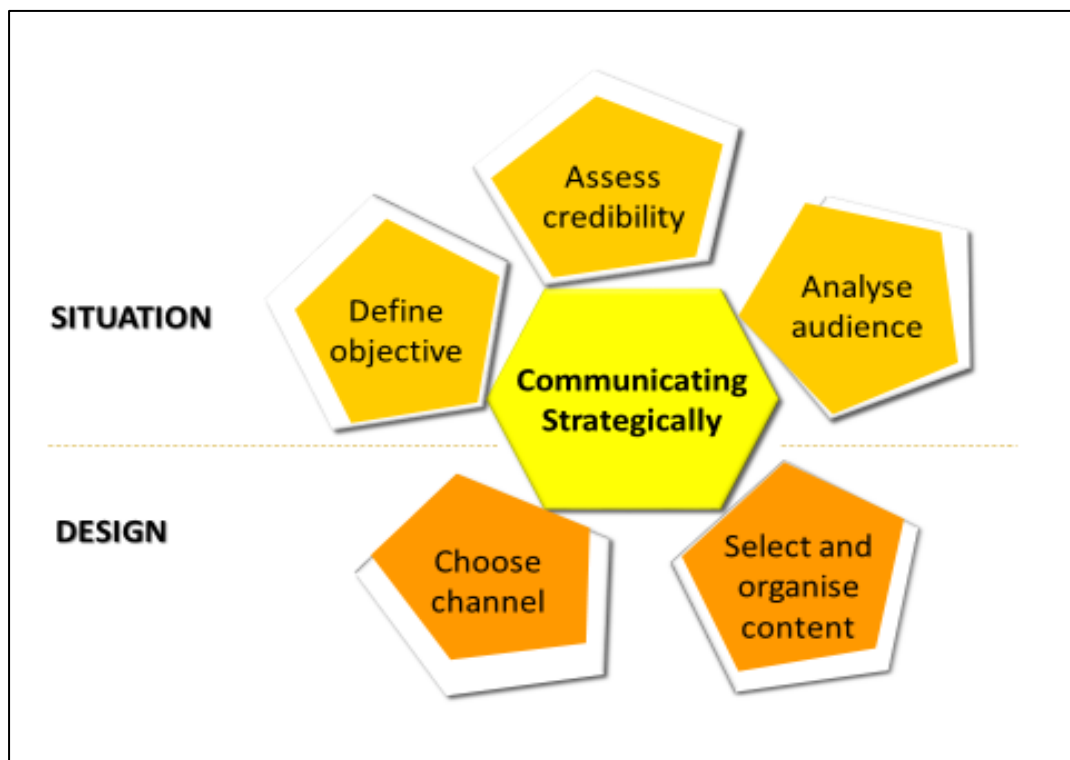


Communicating strategically – plan before you communicate

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The information explosion we face creates a serious dilemma for business professionals: how to manage this increasing information flow with less time available. This creates a very challenging communication environment as business audiences are very selective and critical of the messages they receive. We have to be ready to compete for their time and attention.

To succeed in this challenging communication environment and to ensure that our communications are of high quality and achieve the intended outcome, we need to take a strategic and systematic approach to preparation. This involves analyzing the **communication situation** – objective, credibility, audience – and carefully considering how these three key drivers will affect the **message design** – content selection and channel choice. This input looks in detail at these essential aspects of preparation.



1 Define your communication objective

Regardless of whether you write an e-mail, give a presentation, or call your customer, you should always first analyze the context and define for yourself what you want to accomplish with that particular message. In other words, you should define your communication objective.

Defining your objective is crucial because it helps you make your communication suitable for the given context and ensures it is clear and focused. This, in turn, will increase the chances that the audience will both understand and appreciate your message and react to it in the way you intended.

1.1 Clarify the objective to yourself

You can always word the communication objective to yourself as follows:

'By the end of this message (e-mail, presentation...), I want my audience to _____.'

Very importantly, you should be able to phrase the answer to the question so that you only have one thing that you want the audience to do or think. Otherwise, there is the risk that your message will lack focus and therefore be unclear to the recipient, which, in turn, means you might be less likely to get the response you wanted.

1.2 Make sure your objective is realistic

Your objective needs to be realistic: what can you reasonably expect to achieve given the context? For instance, in a presentation situation the amount of time you have available may well limit what you can hope to achieve. Or if, as a student, you write to a busy manager asking him/her to participate in a school project, you need to consider how much of a contribution you can realistically expect from them.

1.3 Consider how your objective will influence the overall communication style

A clear communication objective enables you to decide on the overall style of your message: is it primarily relational, informational, persuasive, or transformational (Competing Values Framework) or a mixture of these styles?¹

- **Relational messages** aim to build or maintain a good relationship with the audience.
- **Informational messages** focus on clearly explaining and describing.
- **Promotional messages** aim to sell an idea, concept, service or product.
- **Transformational messages** aim to inspire and challenge our audience.

Below are examples of these four different message styles in speeches to demonstrate how different communication objectives and the style influence the content of e.g. speeches.

¹ Rogers & Hildebrandt, 1993

Example 1: Relational message

SITUATION: Department manager giving a speech at the company's Christmas party

The department manager could phrase the communication objective as follows:

- "By the end of the speech, I want my audience to *feel proud of being an employee* at our company." OR
- "By the end of the speech, I want my audience to *feel happy with the department's strong performance* during the challenging year.

Both speeches would be equally valid for the situation, but these two communication objectives would probably lead to somewhat different speech content. The former could focus more on the achievements of the company as a whole, and perhaps its strong overall performance and long history, whereas the latter could well focus more on the department's performance and building team spirit. Still, both would aim to involve the employees and the speaker (e.g. by using pronouns 'we', 'you', 'I') and to make the audience feel good and in the party mood.

Example 2: Informational message

SITUATION: Company representative giving a factory tour to new employees

Here, the communication objective could be, for instance:

- "By the end of the factory tour, our new employees *will understand what our factory layout looks like*", OR
- "By the end of the factory tour, our new employees *will have an understanding of how automated our logistics are.*"

Again, just like in the first example, these two communication objectives would likely lead to somewhat different content. In most informational messages, the communicator has more information about the topic than the audience, and the aim is to share that information with the audience. In contrast to a relational message, an informational message would often include a lot of facts and less reference to the speaker and the audience.

Example 3: Promotional message

SITUATION: Sales person giving a presentation about the company's new Smartwatch to potential customers

Examples of communication objectives could be:

- “By the end of the presentation, the audience *will be convinced that our Smartwatch meets customer needs better than the other products on the market.*” OR
- “By the end of the presentation, the audience *will be convinced that the new battery technology used in our Smartwatch is groundbreaking.*”

Here, the former presentation would address customer needs and product features more broadly, whereas the latter would be more focused on the groundbreaking battery technology. A promotional (persuasive) message thus aims to convince the audience to think or act in a certain way. In contrast to the informational message, delivering a persuasive message requires careful consideration of what would convince that particular audience.

Example 4: Transformational message

SITUATION: Famous, successful alumni member giving a graduation speech to MSc graduates from Aalto BIZ

Examples of possible communication objectives for the speech could be:

- “By the end of the speech, the audience *will be inspired to start their own businesses despite the risks involved in being an entrepreneur.*” OR
- “By the end of the speech, the audience *will feel excited about all the future opportunities that await them now that they have a good business degree.*”

Again, these different communication objectives could lead to rather different speech content. In the first example, the speaker would perhaps use his or her own story as a motivational example of how you can be successful as an entrepreneur. In the second example, the speech could be more generally inspirational, perhaps drawing on several different success stories as the basic storyline. Still, this kind of a speech is often visionary and inspirational.

So, always define your communication objective first because it is the backbone for designing the actual message. Different communication objectives lead to different message styles and choice of content.

2 Assess your credibility as a communicator

After deciding on your communication objective, think carefully about what the audience knows about you as a communicator and how you can emphasize certain factors to build credibility for yourself. You may or may not have some credibility initially, even before you communicate anything. In addition, you could acquire credibility when you communicate.

To assess your credibility think about, for example:

- How well do the audience know you? Do you work in the same company, or are you communicating to an external stakeholder?
- Are you at the same hierarchical level? Top management or entry-level employee?
- Do you have similar educational backgrounds / professions?
- Are you of a similar age?

These, and other situational factors, will have an impact on how formal or informal you should be when you communicate, as well as on your credibility in the eyes of the audience.

2.1 Level of formality is impacted by your relationship with the audience

When you communicate internally within an organization, you can often be more informal than when you communicate with people external to the organization. Similarly, when you communicate “down” hierarchically (e.g. the CEO addressing employees), you have more freedom with the level of formality than when communicating “up” (e.g. a new employee approaching the CEO).

At the same time, there are big differences in communication styles between companies and between countries. As a rule of thumb, if you are uncertain, it is better to err on the side of formality.

Your relationship with the audience also has an impact on whether you need to build credibility for yourself when you communicate with them.

2.2 Five sources of credibility – rank, goodwill, expertise, image, common ground

Depending on the situation, you can draw on five different sources of credibility:

Factor	Based on	Technique
Rank	Hierarchy	Emphasize your title, rank, position or associate yourself with someone who the audience respects or admires.
Goodwill	Personal relationship and trustworthiness	Refer to your established relationship with the audience or your personal record of providing benefits to the group.
Expertise	Knowledge, competence	Refer to your knowledge, competence, qualifications, track record or the acknowledged reputation of your organization. Associate yourself with authoritative sources.
Image	Attractiveness, audience's desire to be like you	Build your image by stressing attributes the audience find attractive and by identifying yourself with audience benefits.
Common ground	Shared ideas, problems or needs.	Acknowledge and highlight values and beliefs that you share with the group. Focus on what you have in common.

Based on Munter & Hamilton (2014) *Guide to Managerial Communication*, p. 9

2.3 Consider your initial and acquired credibility

Initial credibility – the audience's perception of you before you communicate

Even before you communicate anything, the audience has some kind of a perception of you. If you have high initial credibility, your ideas will be taken more seriously and it may well be easier for you to, for instance, break bad news or present unpopular recommendations. For instance, an economist from the Bank of Finland would most likely be seen as having a lot of expertise credibility if he or she was giving a presentation on the country's economic outlook for the coming years.

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Acquired credibility – earned during the communication

Irrespective of how much initial credibility you may or may not have, you need to earn credibility during your communication. Acquired credibility comes from the way your message is both crafted and delivered.

For instance, you can demonstrate your expertise to the audience by showing them that you have in-depth knowledge of the topic, or a proven track record in the field you are dealing with. You could associate yourself with someone who has higher credibility, so that your message has more chance of success. For example, if you were going to give a presentation to the Dean of the Aalto University School of Business, you could refer to the professor who encouraged you to share your ideas with the dean.

If you're interested in reading more about credibility, JoAnne Yates (2001) from MIT provides a good summary of how credibility issues might impact communication as well as some useful tips on persuasive communication in general in her lecture notes from the course 15.279 Management Communication for Undergraduates, Fall 2012 (available under the Creative Commons license, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms/>).²

² https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/sloan-school-of-management/15-279-management-communication-for-undergraduates-fall-2012/lecture-notes/MIT15_279F12_prsuasnRsrch.pdf

3 Analyze your audience

‘Communication takes place in the mind of the listener, not the speaker’

Peter Drucker

A thorough audience analysis is probably the most important situational factor that contributes to a successful communication outcome - different audiences have different information needs. So, after you have established your communication objective and considered your relationship with the audience as well as your credibility in their eyes, you should spend a few moments analyzing the audience in more detail.

This section looks at four useful questions that will help you quickly analyze your audience before you communicate³: who are they, what do or don't they know, how do they feel, and how can they be persuaded?

3.1 Who are they?

- Who is your primary audience: those who receive your message directly?
- Is there a secondary audience: those who will be indirectly affected?
- Who are the key influencers: decision-makers, opinion leaders, gatekeepers?
- What do the audience members have in common? How do they differ?
- Are they managers / employees / external to the organization / internal / friends / colleagues / customers / young / old / from the same country / from different countries?
- What are the demographics: e.g. age, gender, education, occupation?

The answer to these questions will already give you some indication of how you should communicate with them. Typically, the less you know about your audience the more you should focus on these questions.

3.2 What do they know? / What don't they know?

In business, you most often have an expert audience. These kinds of expert audiences often know what information they need from other professionals in order to make the types of routine decisions they have to make. What's more, experienced audiences may judge the quality of a message on how thoroughly, efficiently, and honestly business people and other professionals address their information needs.

So, before communicating, put yourself in the audience's shoes: what information are they likely looking for? Don't overestimate their knowledge level by providing information that is too complex or unfamiliar, but don't underestimate the level, either, by providing content that they're already familiar with.

³ Adapted from an original list in Munter and Hamilton (2014)

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The following questions can help you assess the audience's information needs:

- What do they already know about the topic? Are they novices, experts or mixed?
- What background information do they need?
- What new information are they expecting to get?
- What do they need to know for you to accomplish your objective?

Example of assessing audience's information needs

Consider the following situation:

Your student organization would like to get a company to sponsor a case solving competition (by being the case company) that you want to hold to your students to help them develop their case solving capabilities. You decide to first send them an e-mail and then follow up by phone some time later.

What are things that the audience would likely know / not know about the situation? You would probably need to tell them, for example:

- what school /student organization you represent
- what a case competition is and why you would like to organize it
- when you would like to organize it (day, time, length)
- what the company's role would be - what exactly are you expecting from them
- what is in it for them (WIIFT)

3.3 How do they feel?

Is the audience likely to feel positively or negatively biased towards your message? As a good rule of thumb, when an audience feels positive towards your message, you will have less convincing to do. You can simply focus on reinforcing their positive attitude.

However, if they are likely to feel negative – critical, skeptical or even angry – you will need to carefully build your argumentation to overcome their objections.

Consider asking the following questions to help you assess how they feel:

- What needs and concerns do they have? How can you address them?
- What pressures might they be under (deadlines, budgets, stakeholders)?
- If they have a positive or neutral attitude, can you attempt to build on it by restating and highlighting benefits?
- If they are negative, what can you do to win them round? How will this affect how you structure your message?

3.4 How can they be persuaded?

The key to persuasion is to always communicate with a strong audience focus – communicate from their perspective rather than your own. This can be done by focusing on audience benefits: what's in it for them (WIIFT) and on structuring the message persuasively.

Persuade by focusing on audience benefits

The benefits you choose to focus on will depend upon the audience.

Imagine the following situation: you need a speaker for a school careers event. How could you motivate someone to come?

If you were approaching a recent graduate from the school, you might well motivate them by offering a small fee and also by pointing out that it would be a great opportunity for them to share their recent experience of job-hunting with students who will be soon find themselves in a similar situation.

On the other hand, if you approached a highly experienced business professional in the recruitment field, the motivation might well come not just from the financial compensation but from the opportunity to share their expertise with others, and meet a pool of talented potential employees.

Persuade with message structure

Besides using actual arguments to convince your audience, you can also persuade through the way you organize your ideas. Here are a few examples⁴:

- **foot-in-the door technique**
e.g. asking for a small pilot project instead of a large one, and then if that works, gradually asking for more
- **ask for more technique**
e.g. asking for large-scale implementation up front when you would actually be happy with a small pilot scheme
- **two-sided structure**
addressing and countering potential audience objections by looking at both sides of the argument

Take a look at the Persuasive Techniques (input 2) for more information on these persuasive message structures.

⁴ JoAnne Yates (2001) and Munter and Hamilton (2014)

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4 Select and organize your message content: direct or indirect

There are basically two ways in which you can structure your message: direct or indirect. Most business communication is direct, but there are instances when the indirect structure is recommended. The features of direct and indirect messages are discussed below.

4.1 The direct approach – state the main idea at the beginning

Today, with busy readers and listeners, most routine business messages should use the direct BLUF (Bottom-Line-Up-Front) approach. In this deductive approach the key message is presented at the beginning and is then followed by the details. If the issue is not sensitive, or the audience doesn't have a strong negative bias, this direct approach is usually the best choice.

When you are writing a message, this means that the reader should find out the reason you are writing very early on. Or, if you are giving a presentation, the listeners should find out your main point in the beginning. Think back to your communication objective. What do you want to happen as a result of your message? This is probably the main point that you should highlight.

The direct approach is best for:

1. purely informational messages
2. messages that are likely to receive a favorable or neutral reaction
3. an audience that is positively disposed towards your message
4. sensitive messages when the audience is results-oriented / action-oriented or you have high credibility

4.2 The indirect approach – start with the evidence, reasons or justification

Even though most business communication should use the direct approach, there are some instances where you might want to use the indirect approach instead. For instance, when we have to break bad news or argue for a change: turning down proposals, asking personnel to accept new procedures, or withdrawing employee benefits.

This inductive approach involves beginning with an explanation – an analysis of the situation, evidence, supporting arguments, reasoning and justification – before moving to the main idea, which will be a logical outcome of the ideas presented earlier.

This approach allows the audience to make an informed decision based on the arguments you present. If they accept the arguments and the reasons described, they are more likely to agree to your solution.

The indirect approach may be more effective when you:

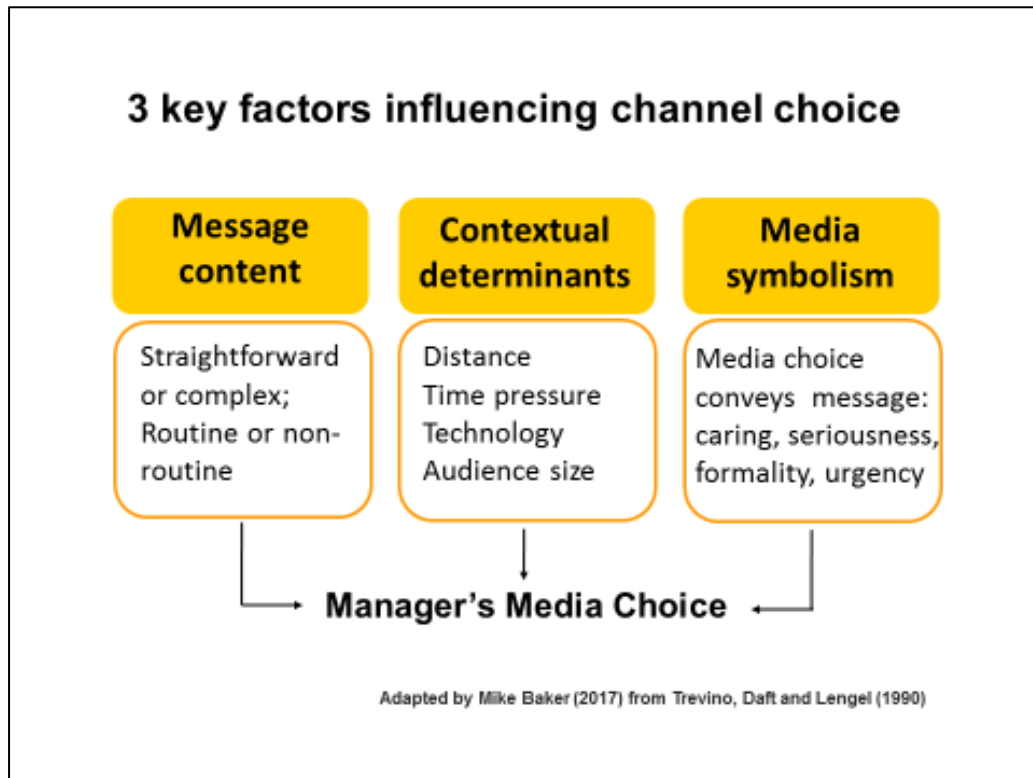
1. are dealing with a sensitive topic
2. have an audience that has a negative attitude
3. have a skeptical or hostile audience
4. lack credibility
5. have an audience with an analytical approach

5 Choose the most appropriate communication channel

Before you communicate, consider what channel, or channels, would be the best fit for the specific communication situation you are facing. In other words, which channel is the most likely to get you the response that you want?

Choosing the wrong channel could mean that the message is not clearly communicated, or worse, it is misinterpreted / misunderstood.

The three key factors that influence channel choice are discussed in this section:



5.1 Message content (factor 1)

Are you communicating a fairly straightforward and routine issue, such as the location and agenda of your department's weekly meeting to your team members? In this case, there is little need for detailed explanations and a small risk of misunderstandings. Because of this, you can probably just send everyone a short email.

Or is it a much more complex and sensitive issue that you're trying to communicate? For instance, withdrawing employee benefits or reorganizing work procedures. In this kind of situation, you might want to use a face-to-face presentation or meeting in which the listener can give you instant feedback – verbally or nonverbally – and which allows you to respond immediately to their needs and concerns.

Send straightforward, routine messages through a lean channel

A leaner channel, such as an email or written Whatsapp message, provides fewer cues to understanding, does not have any non-verbal cues, such as gestures or voice tone, and little or

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no opportunity to get feedback. So, when your message is fairly straightforward, doesn't have any big surprises and there is a common frame of reference (similar knowledge level, shared context) between you and the audience this kind of lean channel will often be sufficient. For instance, if you are simply informing personnel of an upcoming workshop you can do it quickly and efficiently via the company's intranet.

Send complex, non-routine messages through a rich channel

If you feel your message might be misunderstood or misinterpreted because the message receivers have different backgrounds, knowledge, expectations, needs, and concerns then it is probably best to go for a richer channel, such as a face-to-face presentation or meeting.

A rich channel gives the audience lots of cues to help them understand the message in the way it was intended: tone of voice, body movement, facial expression and gestures. Also, as a communicator, you get immediate feedback, which allows you not only to check that they've understood but gives you the opportunity to react and further adjust the message to meet your audience's needs and expectations.

Choose the medium which best matches the message

If rich media are used to communicate a routine message the excessive amount of information may well annoy or confuse the audience. If lean media are used to communicate non-routine messages problems may well arise due to the lack of cues needed to communicate the complexity of the message.

5.2 Contextual determinants (factor 2)

There are times when you might well choose a particular channel simply because it is convenient, efficient, or easily accessible. For instance, you might have to convince your European and Asian finance departments to accept big changes in the way they report to HQ, a potentially sensitive topic. Ideally, this would be best communicated by speaking to each unit individually but due to distance, time constraints or the urgency of the issue, you decide to hold a video conference with each region or maybe even send an email.

5.3 Media symbolism (factor 3)

The choice of channel is not always based solely on the purpose of the communication or the contextual constraints. The medium can be symbolic and in itself become the message.

For instance, you could choose to meet face-to-face when a phone call or email might be enough. This could show your concern, interest in the other party, a desire for teamwork, or simply indicate that you're open to new ideas. Writing a letter rather than sending an email could make your message more official, or serve to highlight the seriousness of the situation.

In conclusion, a strategic approach to communication in general, and preparation in particular, will help you in getting your message across in the highly turbulent international business environment.

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