

# The Dynamics of Effective Business Communication Through the Lens of Neuroscience

This paper was written through the collaborative efforts of: Ken Abendschein, Paula Godar, Jill Eichwald, Melanie Mihal, and Giulietta Versiglia.

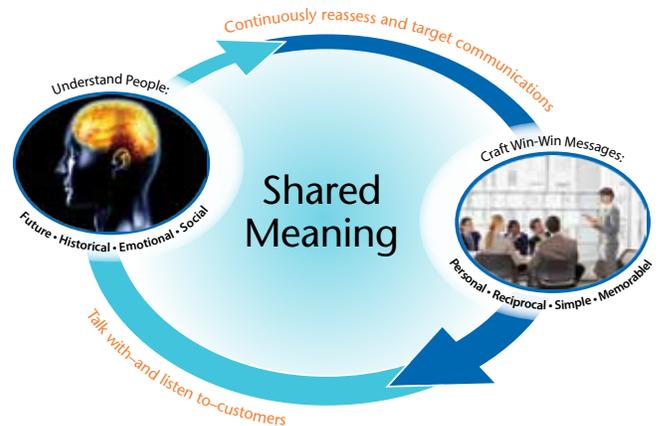
*In 2009, there were 247 billion email messages sent per day worldwide. Out of all these email messages, 81 percent were spam. That means approximately 200 billion emails per day were ignored.*

In business today, communicating effectively has never been more important. Most organizations recognize that communicating with customers, employees and channel partners in a way that supports, respects and encourages these audiences is vital to success. But, the traditional paradigm views communication as a process of transmission from a source to a receiver in a repetitive fashion. I push communication to you and expect or hope you'll act on it. And, we do it with little understanding of how the receiver thinks, interacts or makes meaning of the message.

Through neuroscience we now have a better understanding of what it takes to establish a rich, personalized dialogue with customers, employees and channel partners, reinforcing the brand and producing long-term strategic success. Based on this science and our own work with clients, Maritz has developed the Maritz Communication Model. The model is designed to help organizations transform communications into an exchange of rich interactions between senders and recipients, and, as such, a social activity designed to create engagement, connection and value.

## The Maritz Communication Model

The Maritz Communication Model places the sender and receiver in a bi-directional communication loop with the goal being to create shared meaning over time. The dialogue loop itself is not a unique concept. However, Maritz emphasizes understanding the mental processes of the individual in the communication process. In turn, from our research, Maritz has developed recommendations on designing messaging that organizations can use to increase the effectiveness of communication.



## Understanding People

Neuroscience tells us that the brain's first reaction to a particular communication is to calculate an interest-effort ratio, giving preference to those messages that create the most interest and promise the least expenditure of effort. A person decides whether the communication is worth the effort to pay attention to, let alone act upon, based on a whole lifetime of impressions and experiences which serves as filters. The Maritz Communication Model factors in four filters that our brains use when receiving communication:

- **Emotional**—People pay attention to and respond to communications based on their emotions, values and experience. *Goleman, D. (1995). Emotional intelligence. New York: Bantam.* Values and emotions are so important that little or no conscious thought is necessary to activate them. For example, many people hold fairness as a core value, and immediately reject messages they perceive as unfair. Consider the sales rep receiving a new sales goal that is completely unattainable. That rep's emotional filter will prevent any communication about that goal or incentive program using that goal from getting through. To reach most audiences, ensure the goal is reasonable, provide transparency and establish ground rules up front.
- **Historical**—People pay attention to and respond to communications based on their past experiences and memories. For instance, a person is apt to embrace a

message much more readily if it is associated with existing knowledge. Messaging that builds on and invokes prior messaging and is tailored to a person's positive memories and experiences is much more likely to be attended to. A loyalty program message that refers to a past reward redemption would be especially effective in encouraging future participation.

- **Future**— People pay attention to and respond to communications based on their expectations, goals and hopes/vision for the future. *Smith, A. (1998). Accelerated learning in practice: brain-based methods for accelerating motivation and achievement. Stafford, UK: Network Educational Press.* For example, communications that challenge recipients to work toward a meaningful goal and can paint a vivid picture of that achievement will pique interest and increase engagement.
- **Social**—Recipients pay attention to and respond to communications based on their situation, including economic status, family, trends and traditions. *Tomasello, M. (1999). The cultural origins of human cognition. Boston: Harvard University Press.* Recent neuroscience discoveries demonstrate that the brain is inherently social—it requires and thrives on interactions with other brains. *Cozolino, L. (2006). The neuroscience of human relationships: Attachment and the developing social brain. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company.* Hence, people are finding new ways to express themselves and find common ground with each other through Web communities, such as Facebook and Twitter. These communities can provide valuable insight into what people value and how they want to be communicated with. Tapping into these communities with topics of common interest can be very effective.

When senders take the time to understand the filters through which recipients interpret messages, they can design communications that capture attention and establish ongoing dynamic relationships with a wide range of audiences.

### Crafting Win-Win Messages

Shifting away from one-way and transaction-triggered communication toward more unique, tailored, two-way conversations provides brands with a more effective way to satisfy customer needs and manage word-of-mouth. Getting—and staying—in customers' long-term memory is where a company wants to be. The Maritz Communication model provides recommendations for creating communica-

tions that cut through the competing demands on people's attention to pique interest, embed into long-term memory, and facilitate reliable, rich recall on a consistent basis. The model provides a recipe for success consisting of the following four ingredients:

1. Make it personal
2. Make it reciprocal
3. Make it simple and vivid
4. Make it memorable

#### Make it Personal

To best get through the filters, we need to make messages personal. We can do that in a variety of ways. Each individual interprets a communicated message and makes a decision based upon his or her own ideas, values, beliefs, unconscious needs, emotions and experiences. Taking the time to understand as much as possible about your customers is the first step in crafting more personal and relevant communications with them. Providing context in conversations by picking up where the last one left off and including references to previous conversations or associations is also important. Finally, personalizing messages also means following up on all communications, so your customers know you truly care and are paying attention to them.

#### Make it Reciprocal

It seems simple, but talking with customers, asking them what they value, how often they want to be communicated with and how, can be the difference between failed and successful communication. Creating feedback loops that give customers the chance to voice their opinions, and responding to their feedback in a courteous and respectful manner is key to creating a true dialogue with customers. However, organizations should be mindful that the brain doesn't immediately trust: mutual respect in relationships takes time and must be cultivated and developed. This means communicators must collect information about targeted audiences – employees, clients and partners — from multiple sources and interactions over time.

#### Make it simple and vivid

The brain doesn't like to work too hard. When crafting messages, organizations should ensure they are straight forward and avoid cognitive dissonance. The brain will bounce a message off its past experiences, so it's important to have consistency in messaging. *Dzubak, C. (2008). Multitasking: The good, the bad and the unknown. Synergy:*

*The online journal of the Association of the Tutoring Profession, 1 (2). Retrieved from <http://www.myatp.org/ejournal.htm>* The brain also learns and remembers better through pictures, so use them along with motions and color, remembering that less words are better. (Think, “Got Milk?” “Just Do It,” or “I’m Lovin’ It!”).

### Make it memorable

The brain uses encoding to retain information and store it, which involves transition from working memory to long term memory. The faster this happens, the stronger the memory will be. Memorable communications also minimize transience – the natural course of forgetting over time – blocking and misattribution. The more memorable we can make a message, the more likely it will be retained over time and attributed to the correct sender.

Communications that leverage the following attributes will help organizations establish themselves in the memories of their customers:

1. Surprise and delight – through timing as well as visual appeal.
2. Be open and transparent in all communications which facilitates the positive experience of fairness and trust.
3. Ensure continuity and relevance in communications. The brain filters new experiences through the lens of past experiences and memories. It is important to connect new messages to existing perceptions.

### Conclusion

To sum up, communication planning should connect the dots between the company’s story and the recipient’s life story, and should evolve as both stories evolve. It should find linkages between company goals and the benefits the company’s solutions offer. Messaging should also go beyond transactional information and establish rapport with openness, supportiveness and a sincere interest in the recipient. Incorporating recipient feedback, references to conversations, and tailored messaging to recipient communication style go a long way toward conveying meaning and transmitting value. Companies that communicate what they stand for, care about and contribute to will be viewed as having worthy goals and be rewarded with loyalty. The definition of communication is, and always has been, to create understanding between

participants. However, the communications methods in practice by many people and organizations today achieve anything but understanding. Many, unfortunately, end up in the brain’s spam filter.

How can businesses capture the attention of a wide range of people, each unique in their backgrounds, knowledge and values? Start by recognizing that they all use the same instrument to process information—the human brain—and design communications with the brain in mind. Recent discoveries in neuroscience form the foundation of the Maritz Communication Model and create exciting new possibilities for the future of communications. The model calls for understanding how humans filter the information they receive before creating messaging that then goes beyond blasting one-time, one-way communications out to an audience. The recipe for crafting communications consists of four ingredients: Make it personal, make it reciprocal, make it simple and vivid, and make it memorable.

### The Maritz Institute

Simply stated, the role of The Maritz Institute is to help create: “Better Business. Better Lives.” The Institute serves as a bridge between the human sciences and Maritz business solutions, which are designed to help companies achieve strategic goals by engaging employees, business partners and customers. We bring insight – anchored in science – that provides a foundation for understanding, enabling and motivating people in ways that are most meaningful to them. For more information, visit: [www.maritz.com/institute](http://www.maritz.com/institute).

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