

GROWERTALKS

Features

5/1/2018

Jedi Mind Tricks Unnecessary

Dean Bemis

How many times have we told someone something, only to find out later that they completely missed the message? When this happens, we immediately assume that the other person didn't listen to what we said. This shifts the blame for the failure to communicate to the other person, as they must be "poor listeners." But a more accurate definition of the problem would be that we didn't effectively communicate the message.

When asked to define "communication," most people might describe it as "the transfer of information from one person to another" ... or something similar. This is where the problem begins: a faulty understanding of what communication is. In order to be effective in selling products, services or ideas, we must understand all we can about communications.

A failure to communicate

According to Ferdinand F. Fournies, former professor at Columbia University Graduate School of Business, in the book "Coaching for Improved Work Performance", most people think if we speak clearly, slowly and loudly, people will listen. I witnessed a classic example of this on a trip to Holland:

At the time of my story, I was a cigar smoker, and I went to buy some cigars in a small shop in Enkhuizen. At the counter was an American chap that had apparently bought some Cuban cigars at this shop earlier in the week; he was trying to explain to the clerk that the cigars were old and stale. The clerk spoke little or no English, and as the conversation unfolded, it was obvious he didn't have the faintest idea of what this customer was telling him.

Realizing he was not getting through, our friend repeated his explanation, but at a slower pace and louder. With no reaction from the store clerk, the frustrated patron repeated the explanation a third time, even slower and at full volume.

Obviously, no matter how slow or loud our friend spoke, the clerk wasn't going to understand what was being said. I tell this story because it seems we often communicate this way, even with people who speak English! We might even follow-up our message by asking, "Did you hear what I said?" Why, then, are there so many failures in communication?

To answer that question, we must first know a little about how the brain works. The brain processes information at more than six times the rate of speech. The brain processes information quickly because its primary function is to react to information, so the mind reacts before the message is complete.

Try this little experiment to prove the point: Select a person and ask them to say the first word that pops into their head after you say words such as black, hard, up or down. You will get a range of responses, but tests show you

will seldom find a person who responds with the same word you gave them. Why? Because the brain is reacting to the word you're saying. Your test subject won't respond with the same word. If communication was merely the transfer of information from one person to another, when you said "white," the other person would say "white" as well. Since the mind is reactive, it doesn't think about what you said, it thinks of something else because of what you said!

So, if you have an idea for someone, the least effective way to communicate your idea is to select very precise words and clearly speak those words to your target. Why? As soon as you say the words, the person's mind will think of something else. If we want to achieve "thought transfer" instead of "information transfer," we must say or do something that will cause our idea to pop into the other person's mind. The old saying, "Make them think it was their idea" is what you're trying to achieve.

Thought transfer

Back in the dark ages, before plastic pots were the preferred growing containers, clay pots were the most commonly used growing containers in the marketplace (yes, I go back that far). I worked for a company that had a big stake in the production and sale of the new polypropylene plastic pots, and it was the duty of our sales force to introduce these to the market.

Traveling with our Texas representative, we called on one of the largest potted plant producers in his territory. I knew the owner and had a strong enough rapport with him to toss him a 6-in. plastic pot as we walked between the benches. The owner said he'd seen this plastic pot and proceeded to push his finger right through the thinnest part of it. "See?" he said. "I can't use a plastic pot, it's too flimsy!"

As he was describing how durable his clay pots were, I slowly slid a 6 in. geranium to the edge of the bench and let it fall to the ground, where it shattered into a million shards.

I could have stood in that greenhouse all day long, proclaiming the disadvantages of clay pots and the virtues of plastic pots and never have achieved effective communication with the owner. But with one simple demonstration, the shattering clay pot, the idea of durability popped into his head. I had achieved thought transfer!

If you accept the concept of thought transfer for achieving effective communication, you might next ask, "How can I use this concept without destroying my customer's product?"

The answer is easy—you use thought transfer all the time! When you smile at someone, you're using thought transfer to say, "I like you." If you shake your fist at someone, or perhaps extend a certain finger, you are transferring a thought of disapproval.

And if you don't look directly at someone when talking to them, you're transferring the thought that they're not important. Yet again, I learned my lesson the hard way.

I attended my first Ohio State Short Course (now Cultivate) back in 1971. It was the early days of the trade show that now accompanies the educational part of the program. I'd been given the job of introducing the Fischer Ballet African Violets, which would compete with Optimara African Violets. At that time, Optimara was the market leader and all other violets were a distant second to this powerhouse brand.

Before the convention, I had talked a huge Optimara grower into trying the Ballet brand violets. At the trade show, we were to finalize a large trial of the new violets. Just prior to the meeting to confirm this order, a rather unassuming young man (maybe 15 years old) approached me at our booth and asked about the new Ballet violets. Thinking this wasn't an important prospect, I gave him a fast recap of the violet features. As we talked, my eyes constantly darted out to the aisle in front of our booth looking for the grower with whom I was to arrange this violet trial.

When the grower arrived at our booth, I was surprised to learn that I had been talking to his son. We found a quiet place to talk and the grower's son proceeded to tell his father that the whole time he was talking to me to learn more about this new violet, I kept looking out into the aisle in front of the booth ... he said it was like I was looking for an "upgrade" and it seemed that I didn't consider him important enough to give a good explanation of our violet. The grower informed me that his son, although young, was the violet grower. At that point, they both got up and the young man said, "I really didn't want to trial the violet anyway ... we will pass on it!"

Having lost this golden opportunity, I learned a key lesson about trade shows: There's nobody more important than the person you're currently talking with. Looking away from them transfers a variety of negative thoughts. Experts agree that our body language can often betray thoughts we would rather conceal, and for that reason, we need to be aware of the thoughts our body language is transmitting to others.

So how do we achieve thought transfer? How do we make the other person verbalize our ideas? Knowing that what comes out of a person's mouth had to come from their brain, we can proceed to ask a question, or a series of questions, where the answers they give are what you wanted to tell them. In Part 2 of this series, we talked about the importance of asking the right questions to uncover information that's essential to our making the sale. Now we find another important use of questions: to accomplish thought transfer and thus, communication.

Asking questions that transfer a thought is a learned skill and, as with any skill, it requires practice and becomes easier the more we use it. When I know in advance that I'll be in a situation where the thought transfer technique might be necessary, I'll take a few minutes and write down a series of questions that I hope will make the other person verbalize what I want to tell him or her.

I was working with a large grower in central Illinois and was selling him a boatload of vegetative geraniums. I was in a panic because he was having cultural problems with our geranium. He was ready to drop our product and do a large trial with a variety we couldn't supply. I was convinced the issue was with his water supply, but he wouldn't get his water tested. I needed a series of questions to make him think a water test was his idea. Here are the questions I wrote before calling on this grower:

- Last season, you mentioned yellowing foliage on your calibrachoa baskets ... can you tell me about that?
- What did you find was the cause of the problem?
- How did you find out that your bicarbonate levels in your water were too high for calibrachoa?
- So a water test revealed the problem?
- What do you think is causing your geranium problem?

After asking this series of questions, the grower said he thought he should get his water tested again to see if it might be causing his geranium problems. I agreed and offered to take the water sample so he could send it to a lab.

You don't need to be a Jedi Knight to use thought transfer to improve your communications. Just ask the questions that will make the other person think of what you wanted to tell them. And remember: the problem with communication is the illusion it's been accomplished when it hasn't. **GT**

Dean Bemis offers individual and group sales training exclusively for the horticultural market. His company, Sales by Design, draws on over 40 years of sales and marketing experience. Dean can be reached at (630) 488-6277 or at dbemis@salesbydesign.biz