

COMMUNICATING VE POWERFULLY: BEST PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the necessary communication skills for a successful VE process and new strategies and techniques for maximizing the communication of the VE process. Although the skills and strategies presented apply throughout the execution of a VE Job Plan, they are presented here in the context of the communications during the phase of marketing VE to potential clients.

taking turns, and building relationships. The concept of "form" in communications refers to the delivery mechanics of a given message; i.e., "how" the function is performed. This includes tone of voice, sentence structure, word choice, nonverbal communication, degree of directness, clarity, style, and timing. Research has shown that form-related communicative behaviors comprise up to 93% of a message and the actual wording has only 7% impact for the listener.² Knowing how to manage issues related to good form in communicating often determines the consultant's success in marketing and executing VE.

INTRODUCTION

Function and Form

The most important question in VE is "What is the function?" This question serves the customer well once the VE process is underway. However, many VE consultants must ask a question that applies directly to themselves and to their success. That question is "What is the form that will put me in the position to do VE effectively for my client?"

The communication field has traditionally divided communications into a dichotomy of "function" and "form".¹ Like VE, identifying "function"--in this case the use of language--is a critical step. Functions in communication include making requests, asking questions, acquiring information, sharing information,

Communication and VE

VE consultants have communication as one of their primary tools. Little in the VE process can be demonstrated or executed without communications. The process is delineated verbally, opportunities are identified and often evaluated verbally, and recommendations are decided upon by the group through discussion and debate. For these reasons, VE consultants would greatly benefit by examining the functions and forms of communication, to improve the key elements of this major tool: language, talking, and writing.

Underlying the VE process are two important principles based on communication:

- The potential client must perceive that the VE

process is value-adding, and

- The process depends upon clear and perceptive communication skills.

VE COMMUNICATIONS: PITFALLS AND STRATEGIES

VE consultants who want to improve their communication skills first need to evaluate whether they are performing all of the functions that are necessary for excellence in communications. Whereas many VE consultants are clear about the basic function of listening, in many stressful situations such as when marketing their services, they might tend to listen only for opportunities to speak or to discuss technical issues. This is a pitfall in one sense. The potential VE client is communicating more than opportunities and needs. They are communicating any or all of the following:

- Concern about the effectiveness of VE
- Lack of comprehension of the VE methodology
- Lack of decision-making power
- Desire for re-assurance that they are doing the right thing
- Concern about specific issues that have not been voiced
- Distrust of the people making presentations
- Fear that the consultant does not fully understand their needs

The VE consultant who "reads" the potential client as communicating any of the above might be tempted to answer each of these concerns with more detail, facts, and charts. In other words, with more words. However, linguistic knowledge tells us that the client actually has communication needs that would be better met by providing more positive experience in the realm of form. In this case, form follows function. Listed below are 10 functions that would reassure the client and are thus critical to successful VE communications, along with suggested forms (e.g., behaviors) that satisfy those functions:

1. Customize Communications: Preparation and formatting of speech and documentation
2. Demonstrate Confidence: Slow, calm, confident speaking
3. Permit Response: Pausing in speaking to allow questions and voicing of concerns
4. Address Emotions: Direct addressing of obvious and subtle emotional components of the communications
5. Foster Teamwork: Use of a warm-up period

before professional discussions begin

6. Clarify Message: Use of clear, less technical visuals that directly address clients' concerns; use of analogies, anecdotes, examples, and plain English
7. Generate Rapport: Projecting friendly and calm nonverbal communication
8. Read Client: Good interpretation of the clients' nonverbal communications
9. Create Balance: Letting the client talk more than the consultant
10. Convey Genuineness: rather than trying to dazzle the client with showmanship (trying to impress or entertain), being alert and sensitive to the clients' needs

The remainder of this paper focuses on how and when to apply the above 10 behaviors for improved communications. They apply throughout the execution of the VE Job Plan; however, these behaviors will be presented in the context of marketing VE.

IMPROVING FORM TO SATISFY THE FUNCTIONS IN VE COMMUNICATIONS

Customize Communications

Customizing the communications involves knowing your potential client's needs, concerns, sensitivities, decision-making power, and objectives prior to the formal meeting. This form of front end loading (FEL) for communications is a critical step in optimizing the communication process. Customizing your communications adds huge value to the overall communication process by narrowing the focus and tailoring the communications to the client. From the client's perspective, customized communications by the VE consultant demonstrate the consultant's integrity, sensitivity to the client's needs, ability to plan, and expertise.

Strategies and techniques for customizing presentations start with surveying the client's interpersonal needs and concerns at the beginning of the process of introducing VE. One technique is to telephone or meet briefly with the client to ask a few questions about their objectives, concerns, expectations, and internal organizational issues. Some examples are:

- "We will be meeting with you next week to discuss project X. To customize the meeting with you, we have a few questions to ask ahead of time. Do you have five minutes to answer them? First, what obstacles do you see to

- getting this project done?....”
- Is there anyone else who should be invited to this meeting to help decide on next steps?
 - We like to provide exactly what our potential client needs. To do that, we would like to talk with you or someone in your organization who can give us a clear picture of how comfortable you are with the VE process.

Clients will welcome this opportunity to discuss more than the specifications for the VE project. Also, this type of preliminary contact has a subtle persuasive effect on the client by creating a relationship with the client before trying to establish a formal relationship. Research shows that the interpersonal components of a meeting often have as great or greater impact than the factual components.³

More techniques include self-monitoring by the VE consultant and regular monitoring of message reception and reaction of the potential client during the meeting. Examples of this technique are worded as:

- “Before we go on, let’s make sure we’re clear about your concerns.”
- “Do you have any questions at this point?”
- “Have you had any experience with this type of process before?”
- “Before we begin this section on your potential investment, is there anyone else whom we should invite to hear this information?”

Much like FEL, early evaluation of and response to the potential client’s needs and concerns has a significant impact on later communications and the success of the VE process. To perform this function, VE consultants need to plan the time and content of these initial interviews and discussion and execute them early enough in the process to be able to apply the findings to later communications and VE plans. The function of customizing communications at the onset of the VE process saves time and increases effectiveness.

Demonstrate Confidence

As consultants develop their expertise, their knowledge of the subject material becomes second nature. Speaking about second nature knowledge can produce a tendency to talk about the subject at great length and with rapid speech, as if the consultant were on “autopilot”. However, VE’s complexities require slower, more deliberate communications.

The potential VE client needs time to fully understand VE before buying in to--and contributing during--the VE Job Plan.

Also, slower speech (about 130 words per minute) is as calming to the speaker as it is to the listener. One reason why slower speech is calming to the speaker is that it allows more thinking time for formulating clear, precise expression of ideas. Pressured speech resulting from high speed communications is analogous to high speed driving -- little time to look around, plan the next move, or correct an error in judgement. Deliberately slower speech not only conveys calmness, but also control. A slow, even pace unconsciously signals the potential client that the speaker is in control of his or her subject and can protect confidences as well. Slower speech is achieved by self-timing and deliberate practice under conditions of increasing stress.

Because the VE process can be expensive in both time and financial commitments, potential clients often listen through a filter of concerns and anxiety about their decision to proceed with a VE project. Anxiety and other strong emotions are powerful detractors of attention, concentration, and hence comprehension. When the VE consultant speaks, he or she needs to first calm and reassure the potential client before “downloading” VE. Although it is not very credible to announce reassurance, the appropriate tone of voice and slower speed is very reassuring to the concerned client. VE consultants can learn how to control their speaking voices by using feedback, such as a VU meter, and by reading aloud easy material that has been marked for slower speaking rate.

Finally, the VE consultant can improve the impact of his or her message by controlling emphasis and sentence and word length. By emphasizing key nouns and verbs in speaking, the message becomes instantly clearer. By dramatically reducing sentence length to an average of no more than 10 words, the message becomes more succinct and precise. Eliminating unnecessary multisyllabic words and using simpler vocabulary also increase the likelihood of easy comprehension. (Example: not “utilize” but “use”).

Permit Response

Research shows that the average adult can hold only 16 words in short term memory and they require regular pauses to process verbal information.⁴ In my experience, the average consultant often speaks in 30

word sentences at a rapid rate. Consequently, listeners might be struggling to understand and "keep up" with the consultant's presentation. This situation is potentially alienating. Instead, VE consultants need to consciously add pauses of varying lengths between groups of words and before and after strong points or issues.

Another reason for improved use of pauses is that silence allows the potential client the opportunity to ask questions and make statements that reveal a good deal about his or her comprehension, motives, and commitment to VE. If the VE consultant allows more pauses, then the amount of communication by the potential client increases. This technique compensates for the tendency of VE consultants to make presentations, which, although often expected if not requested by the potential client, are rarely as effective as conversations. In a conversation, the potential client plays a more active role than the passive listener at a presentation. The more involved the potential client is, the more open that person will be to new ideas.

Address Emotions

Deciding on use of the VE--as well as making decisions during execution of the VE Job Plan--is an emotional issue. Like any other sales situation, the potential client and VE consultant have to grapple with insecurity, uncertainty, and the anxiety involved in making choices and decisions. The VE consultant cannot afford to ignore these feelings, because they are powerful enough to derail even the most carefully considered presentation of features, benefits, and processes. However, both the consultant and the client are often loathe to deal with emotions in a direct way. To improve the comfort of the potential client, the VE consultant needs to read the client's emotional needs and concerns and meet the challenge of disarming any negative emotions and building on positive emotions.

There are a variety of verbal and nonverbal ways to disarm such negative emotions as uncertainty and to encourage such positive emotions as confidence. Besides slow and calm speech and pauses, the VE consultant can disarm uncertainty and encourage confidence in their work by controlling negative body language, being deliberate and exact in answering questions, and using reassuring anecdotes about "other clients". An example of the beginning of a reassuring anecdote is "Some of our clients worry about whether this process will work with production personnel. In our experience...." Also reassuring to

clients is careful consideration and replies to their exact questions, avoiding a tendency to make "canned" speeches.

Any improvement in clarity also contributes to positivism on the part of the potential client. Clarity leads to good comprehension, which is very persuasive. Clarity is best achieved by providing information in a well-organized form with as little use of technical jargon and abbreviations as possible. Clarity is even more significant when the potential clients are not native speakers of English.

Foster Teamwork

In their anxiety to complete the communications and initiate and drive the VE process, VE consultants can move too quickly into the detail of the work. Research shows that most people learn better and perform better in tests when they have had a warm-up period to adjust to each other and develop a sense of "team". During this warm-up period, topics of conversation should be about up-beat subjects low in controversy and, if possible, led and determined by the client. VE consultants can learn a good deal about their clients' interests during warm-up periods by listening for patterns of information. For example, a potential client who talks about how he or she views paperwork as a waste of time will probably respond best to processes with less paperwork and more discussion.

Clarify Message

Although VE consultants may state the same message repeatedly in their careers, the clarity of the reception of that message by the potential client varies daily. The function of clarifying the message involves several behaviors: visual representation, simplifying, concretizing, and timing the message or information.

Good conversation or presentations are greatly enhanced by well-designed accompanying visuals. Usually in the form of overhead transparencies, such visuals need not be "fancy." Excessively colored or designed visuals can even be distracting and lead to questions about the VE consultant's priorities, which could appear out of order when expensive, elaborate visuals are overused.

Good visuals obey clear rules of use of color, positioning, content, and design. For multicultural clients, "kicker boxes" add clarity to the message of each visual. Use of PowerPoint and other high

quality presentation software packages can easily enhance the impact of the VE message. Basically, the wording should be minimal and the graphic content well thought out. Color should be limited to highlighting of key points or figures. VE consultants who want maximal impact of their message need simple visuals to accompany their key points. Simple visuals are not only easy to remember but also flexible, so that the VE consultant can modify his or her presentation or conversation easily without having to explain complicated or wordy slides.

Finally, from an image standpoint, the VE consultant's visuals reflect his or her thoroughness, attention to detail, and impeccability. After all, the potential client is buying much more than the process. They are "buying" the consultant. The consultant can be represented by either wordy, confusing, or sloppy visuals or by concise, clear, and neat visuals. The potential client is sensitive to both the content and design of any visuals representing the consultant.

The concepts of concretizing and simplifying are closely related. Concretizing means using tangible, specific means of communicating abstract ideas. This includes examples, anecdotes, precedents (others who have had similar experiences), cases, comparisons, and analogies. Concretizing greatly increases comprehension by the client. Simplifying communications includes reducing the use of jargon or acronyms, reducing sentence length and complexity, being succinct and to-the-point, and communicating only value-adding detail. Both of these behaviors are key to convincing the client that the VE process is feasible.

Timing refers to behavior of inhibiting communications until the best possible opportunity. Good timing requires that the VE consultant measure the client for receptivity, and understanding and that he or she shapes the communication to conform to the gradual changes in attention, patience, and need for closure that are built into meetings. VE consultants who are attuned to subtle changes use that knowledge to time their input most effectively.

Generate Rapport

The VE consultant should make use of symmetry, meaning the mirroring of the potential client's topics, intensity, and nonverbal communication as ways of establishing rapport during the warm-up period and throughout meetings. If the client's culture is casual, then the VE consultant can mirror casual behavior in

his or her dress and posture. Even the sense of urgency and professionalism varies along a continuum based upon the client company's culture. The VE consultant can even work from a checklist to do a "quick read" on the client's culture. The data gathered on this important topic has a large impact on the consultant's behavior and consequently on the potential client's perceptions of the consultant.

The VE consultant can also alter their body language to increase receptivity to the VE process. This includes slowing down gestures, making them more graceful and relaxed, positioning your body and head directly toward your client, and increasing relaxed eye contact. Sensitivity to cultural differences also improves the perception and relationships established during the VE process.

Read Client

The potential client sends many clusters of verbal and nonverbal signals about their thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and overall comfort. It is imperative that the VE consultant learn about these clusters and respond to them as soon as possible. Clusters of behaviors that signal anxiety, resistance, or lack of comprehension are the most significant. The VE consultant who is attuned to the client's signals improves his or her chances of success in establishing rapport and in making progress with the client. The client can be very appreciative of a perceptive consultant.

Create Balance

The knowledgeable VE consultant will often talk too much during meetings with potential clients. The desire to inform is very strong. This approach has two critical disadvantages. One is that overtalking forces the potential client into too passive a role. Second is that the VE consultant who is "outputting" during most of the meeting has less opportunity to listen to and "read" the potential client. The less input the consultant gathers from the client during the meeting, the less he or she can tailor the message to the potential client.

VE consultants can tailor their message better by:

- regularly self-assessing for amount of talking,
- asking questions,
- taking turns more often in conversation, and
- soliciting feedback and checking comprehension throughout the meeting

These techniques can be practiced in everyday conversational speech in preparation for their use under the challenging conditions of working with potential clients.

Convey Genuineness

Some VE consultants believe that they have to "dazzle" the client or "bowl them over" with an overabundance of data, visuals, and constant or rapid-fire talk. However, potential clients can suspect that dazzle is a cover-up for serious gaps in thinking or costing or even sincerity and authenticity. Clients are much more comfortable with humbler, more feasible descriptions and promises of success. Top managers are especially sensitive to glamorized or exaggerated messages. They prefer truthful communications and explicit answers to questions. Top managers also have other preferences that are easily met by the attuned VE consultant (See Appendix 1.) The VE consultant must also enact an effective balance between the perceived style of "professional" and "pal" (e.g., "one of the guys/gals").

RECOMMENDATIONS

I recommend that VE consultants re-evaluate their approaches to marketing, initiating, and facilitating the VE process to include not just focus on project planning but on communication planning as well. VE consultants will benefit from communication analyses of their typical performance and how it impacts their success. VE consultants can check their performances against the 10 functions to assess personal strengths and weaknesses. These assessments should be done continually during the VE process so that VE consultants can adjust to changing demands.

VE consultants who work in teams also need to consider the interaction of personal strengths and

weaknesses and develop a plan to optimize the use of varied strengths and compensate for weaknesses. This unifying approach will increase communicative effectiveness and present a symbolically strong image to the potential client.

Due to the increasing diversity of VE clients, close attention to the communication process is imperative. When the cultures of clients and consultants differ radically, then the exploratory process needed to customize the communications should increase. I recommend that VE consultants assess and respond to both the personal and business cultural issues of their potential clients.

Finally, I recommend that VE consultants build their understanding of interpersonal communication, group dynamics, diversity issues, and knowledge of basic linguistic principles as ways to optimize their overall communications. This type of knowledge serves both consultants and clients.

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 1
 Communications Preferred by Senior Management

Below are several generalizations to guide you as you prepare to present to upper management:

CATEGORY	PRINCIPLE	METHODS	EXAMPLES
BREVITY vs. Volume and Depth	Upper management prefer short, pre-digested communications.	Provide short (under 2 page) documents, clear slides, and crisp, concise wording. (Be selective.)	"The point is that this system will work for only 3 business units."
STRATEGIC vs. tactical	Upper management prefer strategic communications.	Talk about concepts, not detailed methods.*	"The concept is to consolidate the function into one group."
PRECEDENCE vs. Process	Upper management would rather know about previous examples than about how you arrived at your conclusions.	Find and use international examples of benchmarking or precedence and link these to your concepts.	"What I am proposing is being done successfully at Sterling. They have seen a 20% reduction in cost as a result. I think that we can do even better than that."
VISUALS vs. Words	Upper management respond very well to clear visuals.	Take the time to edit and graphically improve your visuals. Limit visuals to charts and graphics, as opposed to frequent word slides.	"As you can see from this chart, the current system works well in the UK but not in Japan."
WARM vs. Cold Materials	Upper management prefer to have received related information ahead of time rather than at the moment of presentation.	Send a handout a week in advance of your presentation. At the presentation, however, simplify the mailer to a very short handout with highlights only.	"You received my handout a week ago detailing the extent of individual test library use. Today's handout shows the proposed system configuration."

*Avoid describing processes at length, giving lengthy acknowledgements, using slang or acronyms (unless positive they are well understood by all), complaining, or impressing. (We know you don't do any of these things.)

Further recommendations for dealing successfully with the politics of communications are:

1. Match their interests based upon your observations, documents, and quotes as well as by asking those who know them well. (Do not forget their secretaries or assistants.)
2. Check your and your audience's networks
3. Edit your speaking and writing (output less, input more)
4. Solicit information about relationships as often as for data