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The 7% Myth

Why Content Really Matters!

How many of you have attended presentation training and heard that only 7% of your message is conveyed through words, and that the remaining 93% is 38% voice and 55% body language? Most people blindly accept these ratios as a proven result of scientific experiment, but they have always bothered me as I felt the 7% for content was too low.

In my presentation class, "The Perfect Pitch", I use the figure of 20% for content without a lot of basis, so I decided to research the 7-38-55 rule to see if it actually made sense - both scientifically and emotionally. I examined the 7-38-55 rule to test its implications, the basis for the study, and any more recent work in the area. The results are surprising and certainly shatter the 7% myth.

The Logical Implications of 7-38-55

Accepting that 93% of your meaning comes across through voice and NVC (non-verbal communication), think through some of the ridiculous implications.

1. **Foreign Languages.** As words only account for 7% of communications, you should be able to visit any country in the world, and interpret 93% of their communications by interpreting body language and vocal tone! That means learning French, German or even Japanese should be a snap.
2. **Your own language.** Having been born and raised in the UK, I am not even sure that my US colleagues even understand 93% of what I am saying. How many of you even have a 93% accuracy when dealing with your friends and loved ones?
3. **The unimportance of words.** Witnessing the recent elections in many countries over the last 18 months will make you realize just how important words are. Although non-verbal aspects of communication are vitally important (who votes for a

candidates who never smiles and always slouches), most political campaigns are made or more notably destroyed through words alone.

4. **Playing Charades.** If you have ever played the game of charades you already know that language is by far the most effective way of communicating complex and/or abstract ideas. The most frustrating part of the game is keeping your mouth shut.

The Source of 7-38-55

Dr Albert Mehrabrian of UCLA performed his initial studies and experiments in the early 1970's - resulting in the publication of two books: *Silent Messages* (1971) and *Nonverbal Communications* (1972). These books then refer to various research material published in professional journals.

1. **Inconsistent Messages.** Chapter 3 of *Silent Messages* first mentions the 7-38-55 ratio, but only with reference to the "resolution of inconsistent messages". He then states that actually very few things can be communicated non-verbally and he later clarified that he was investigating liking/disliking which cannot be generalized to normal communications.
2. **Maybe.** Dr. Mehrabrian conducted his study using a single word - "maybe". Three female speakers were taped while saying *maybe* in varying tones to communicate three attitudes (like, neutral, dislike) towards an imagined person. Then the tapes were listened to by 17 other females who had to determine attitude based upon the single word.
3. **Black and White.** Next Dr. Mehrabrian took B&W photos of three female models as they used facial expressions to communicate like, dislike and neutrality. These photos were then shown to the same 17 female subjects while simultaneously hearing the word *maybe*. The conclusion from this experiment was that facial was stronger than vocal by a 3:2 factor.
4. **Combined Studies.** The prior study was integrated with another reported study from 1967 to derive the .07, .38 and .55 coefficients. The earlier study used three words ; *honey*, *thanks* and *dear* to be positive, *maybe*, *really* and *oh* to be neutral, and *don't*, *brute* and *terrible* to convey negativity. Two female speakers were

employed to read the nine words in each of three tones which were then listened to by 30 UCLA undergraduates.

More Recent Studies and Techniques

In later follow-up interviews and correspondence, Dr. Mehrabian disavows the 7-38-55 ratios as not relating to real-world situations and questions how anyone could even think to apply them given the limited one-word materials and minimal number of subjects. So what are some tips and techniques to effectively improve communications?

1. **Albert Did Say.** The effect of redundancy (consistent communications using two or three channels instead of just one) amplified the attitude transmitted in any one channel. So non-verbal communications and voice can amplify or diminish your message, but they are not the primary drivers.
2. **Content is King.** When presenting or giving a product demonstration, people are there to listen (and watch) you so that they can learn something from you. There are many motivational speakers who dash about the stage, exuding positive energy and wind milling the hands around - yet they have zero content. Some of the most interesting speakers have a quiet fireside, "professorial" approach and they simply draw you in with their confident body language and tone until all you focus on is their words.
3. **Words Versus Text.** **Dr. Richard E. Mayer**, in his book *Multimedia Learning*, compares the retention and transfer rates of similar PowerPoint presentations - a baseline set with standard bullets as compared to a media-rich, single point per slide alternative. He noted that memory rates related to actual content increased by 28%, and the ability of the audience to transfer their knowledge and utilize the new information presented increased by a massive 79%. This is due to the low capacity of working memory in most humans, which limits the number of items we can concurrently focus upon to about three or four concepts.
4. **A Proven Five Step Method.** Follow along..
 - (a) A Clear Key Message
 - (b) That has Value To The Audience
 - (c) Supported by a Logical Structure
 - (d) With Interesting Examples and Illustrations
 - (e) Supported by Visual (not verbal) Material

Summary

The 7-38-55 rule we have all been taught is total garbage. Its creator never intended to apply the results to "normal" mass communications, and certainly never in a business setting. So although non-verbal communication and vocal tone are important amplifiers, you have to have logical, meaningful content to deliver first!

With acknowledgement to Dr. C.E. "Buzz" Johnson and ES/NZ.

"The way to get started is to quit talking and start doing"

Walt Disney

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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