

To Inform

or

To Persuade

By Dean Brenner

Envision for a moment

that you are sitting in a meeting within your organization, about to hear a presentation by one of your colleagues. The presenter starts by saying: "Today I would like to give you an update on the progress of our project...."

Maybe if we could put
presidential power in a pot
and boil it all down,
a big part of what we would find
at the bottom would be
language, the use of language,
the potency of words.
Power to persuade is power indeed.

David McCullough,
Pulitzer Prize Winning Author

Now think about this. You are in your office, and a sales person who routinely visits you sits down for a meeting and begins by saying: "Thanks for your time today. I would just like to give you a quick update on the performance of our mutual funds..." Sound familiar? I hear it all the time—in coaching sessions, in training classes, and on the phone with my clients. I constantly hear people describe their communications as "updates" or "informational."

Therein lies a critical flaw in the way most of us communicate. At one point or another, most of us segment our professional communication situations—presentations, sales calls, conversations, meetings, speeches, conference calls or interviews—into two groups. We classify some of our communications as opportunities to persuade. Others, we classify as merely informative.

Segmenting professional communication scenarios this way is a critical mistake. All of your professional communication should be treated as opportunities to persuade. None of your professional communication should ever be classified as "informative." Why? I'll answer that query by way of a story.

This is a real example from a client of The Latimer Group, whom we will refer to as "Jane."

Jane works for a manufacturing company and is the project leader on a high-profile, labor-intensive project. To her colleagues and managers, the project appeared to be running behind schedule and exceeding the budget, and they asked Jane to provide a status report. While she felt the project was running as smoothly as could be expected with the limited resources she had been given at the outset, Jane knew the stakes were high and asked The Latimer Group to help her prepare her presentation.

We listened to Jane's practice run, and a few questions immediately came to mind:

- 1. Is Jane trying to inform me or persuade me?** When I pressed her on what her goals for the presentation were, she said, "To inform senior management of our progress." RED FLAG #1.
- 2. What does Jane want me to do?** At the end of her presentation, I asked a simple question: What do you want from me? What do you want me to do? When she was presented these simple questions, she said, "Understand where we are on this project." But was that it? Her answers were not articulate or clear. RED FLAG #2.
- 3. What does Jane want me to remember?** I also asked her what she wanted the audience to believe about the project and her team. When we walk out of the room, what do you want us to remember, above all else? Again, she had no clear answers. RED FLAG #3.
- 4. Does Jane understand what will concern the audience most?** Jane told us her goal was to prove the project is still worthwhile. But this was a high-profile project, and senior management had already committed to it. Jane did not understand that they were most likely to be concerned with what she and her team were doing to stay on budget and on schedule. RED FLAG #4.

Ultimately, Jane was underestimating three things for this meeting: her goals, her opportunity, and her leverage. In order to make her project a success, she needed to use the meeting as an opportunity to persuade. If she recognized senior management's primary concern was staying on schedule, she should use the meeting as an opportunity to ask for additional manpower and budget. If she understood their concerns were budget related, she should ask for an extended deadline or manpower. The common denominator is that Jane needed to persuade senior management to see that the end result remained well within reach, as long as she received additional resources. An "update" would not be enough.

Many of us adopt the same strategy as Jane when we prepare to communicate. All too often, we treat our business presentations, our speeches, our sales calls, and our meetings as informational. Quite simply, this is a mistake.

When we approach our communications with a strategy merely to inform, we relinquish our potential power. Do not give up the opportunity to persuade, to shape opinion, and influence the way your audience makes decisions. Do not leave the real opportunity on the table and ignore the potential leverage at your disposal.

How will you benefit if you treat every communication as an opportunity to persuade?
Let's return to Jane.

The Latimer Group's GAP Method for persuasion—set your Goal, understand your Audience, and create your Plan....

In our work together, we immediately had Jane apply The Latimer Group's GAP Method for persuasion—set your **Goal**, understand your **Audience**, and create your **Plan**—and reorganize her presentation. Once she adopted the mindset of persuasion and applied this simple framework, the performance immediately improved.

- 1. Jane understood the likely concerns of her audience.** She spent time considering what they would be most interested in. She thought about what their reservations might be. She developed answers to the questions that she knew they would ask. She structured her entire presentation around concerns and topics that would be critical to influencing their thoughts and their actions.
- 2. Jane articulated clear recommendations and key points.** It was now obvious to the audience what the most important aspects of the presentation were. And since Jane had taken the critical initial step of understanding her audience, her key points, and recommendations were more clearly aligned with the issues important to the audience.
- 3. Jane provided clear action steps.** She made it clear what she and her team would be doing over the coming weeks and months. This allowed her audience to know what to expect. She also made it clear what she hoped the audience would do to support the project. She provided them with a clear finish line, and with clear frameworks for evaluating success.
- 4. Jane's message became memorable.** It is easier for your audience to remember your message when you structure it in a way that considers their position, makes clear recommendations, and provides clear action steps. Jane did all of these things and her presentation was therefore digestible and memorable for her audience.

Here's the ultimate result when you prepare to persuade rather than merely to inform: You leave little to chance. Once Jane applied The Latimer Group's GAP Method to her preparation, she identified the most important aspects of her message and structured her entire presentation around those points.

Here's another way to think about it. On your best day speaking to an interested audience, studies tell us they are likely to remember a maximum of 25 percent of what you say within 12 hours after your presentation. Don't get discouraged; this is actually an exciting statistic. It means your

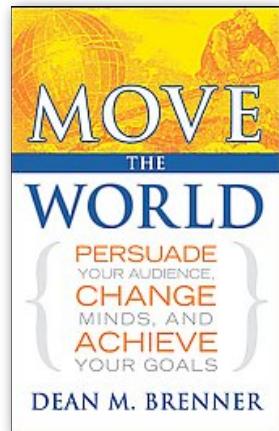
focus should be to identify the 25 percent of your message that is most critical to your success and then structure your presentation so that this 25 percent is front and center before your audience. This is the best way to make sure they remember it. Otherwise, if you leave it to chance, you will let others decide the most memorable aspects of your message.

Here's the ultimate result when you prepare to persuade rather than merely to inform: You leave little to chance.

Persuasion is difficult. Convincing well-informed, opinionated professionals they should adopt your strategy, buy your product, change their mind, follow your lead, or invest in your company is no easy task. But the ability to do so is critical to your success. The people who can successfully persuade get promoted, earn more substantial bonuses, build their own brand, and are in great demand. They utilize their own power to persuade.

When you aim to inform, you leave opportunity on the table, and your leverage remains unused. On the other hand, when you attempt to shape opinion, you dramatically increase the chance for success.

Our most direct advice to you is this: treat every professional communication opportunity as an opportunity to shape opinion—about you, your organization, your product, or your service. When you do so, you will dramatically increase your chances for success.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dean Brenner is an accomplished public speaker and experienced executive coach with a list of Fortune 500 clients. Dean's firm, [The Latimer Group](#), is focused on creating powerful verbal communication. They help their clients articulate their message and in turn lead more effectively, sell more successfully and raise more capital by developing persuasive public speaking, presentation, and media skills. Dean is also the author of the recently published book, [Move the World: Persuade Your Audience, Change Minds and Achieve Your Goals](#). In this book, Dean introduces a step-by-step process that will dramatically increase your ability to persuade your audience to follow your lead, buy your product, or invest in your idea.

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