

Employees are *Not* an Audience

By Glynn Young

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Robert Archibald, a “public historian” and president of the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, wrote a book in 1999 called *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community*. The book both delights and challenges – he’s a wonderful writer (and speaker; some of these essays started out their lives as speeches). He’s relentless on the subject of what we have done to our communities in the past 50 or 60 years.

Archibald tells a story about working at the Montana Historical Society, and how he and his staff were working on an outreach program: “We attempted to define what I now call community, but what we then called audiences, without reference to a clear statement of organizational mission. We also debated the issue not with reference to real needs of people but rather with reference to existing institutional activities.”

Those two sentences might sum up 99 percent of employee communications practiced today – defining *audiences*, no real understanding of why you’re really trying to communicate with them, and more interested in the organization’s needs than in the needs of those you’re trying to reach.

I embarrassed myself recently by finding a 20-year-old presentation on communications training. I found this wonder while rooting through old files in my basement. While it was undated, I knew it was old – it was on overhead transparencies.

The first transparency asked: “First and foremost, who is your real *audience*?”

Ouch.

I’m not sure precisely when it happened, but for some time I’ve avoided using the word *audience* to describe the people with whom I want to communicate. *Audience* is closely allied to another word I try to avoid – *message*. (In a communications context, *message* is bad enough as a noun; it’s absolutely awful as a verb.)

Employees are **not** an *audience*. Our jobs as professional communicators are **not** to deliver *messages* to employee *audiences*. If employees are an *audience*, doesn’t that mean your CEO is supposed to be Dan Rather or Tom Brokaw?

Put the two words together, and an entire philosophy of communication is revealed: “How should we be *messaging* this *audience*?”

Audience comes from the Latin word *audire* – to hear. That’s what *audiences* are supposed to do – to hear (or if it’s a videoconference, *audiences* are supposed to hear and see).

In the context of organizational communications, we should look at the word *audience* as one packed with three pieces of freight we’re generally unaware of.

First, communicating to an *audience* implies the use of the broadcast model of communication – and the broadcast model (think television, radio and movies) is a one-way communication model. It moves in one direction – generally at the people it’s directed toward. It doesn’t come back to the one who’s communicating. If it goes anywhere, it goes between the people who are communicated at. When you’re part of an *audience*, you do what *audiences* generally do – which is watch and maybe talk to each other later about how you thought it went. *Audiences* don’t (normally) talk back to the movie screen, the radio or the television set unless they want to vent an immediate opinion or emotion; they don’t seriously think their words will be heard. Audiences are smart enough to figure out that, in this kind of communication context, they’re not supposed to talk back.

And your CEO wonders why nobody asks tough questions at the quarterly employee meeting.

Second, it’s no surprise that the broadcast model is the favorite communication model in command-and-control management structures. It gives the

impression (to the one communicating, if to no one else) that he or she is in control, that the listeners are waiting for the wisdom to come down from the mountaintop, that those employees will simply get what the new culture is all about and do what they're supposed to do if we can just educate them enough.

Third, thinking you communicate to an *audience* betrays where the real communication emphasis lies – on the organization's needs, not the needs of its people. If your employees are an *audience*, you're inevitably more concerned about what the *audience* has to do to solve the organization's problems and make the organization successful.

In the broadcast model, professional communicators are not part of the *audience*, of course; we're part of management, the strategic part, and we already know what we have to do to make the organization successful, because we have a seat at the table.

When you're communicating to an *audience*, you have to have a *message*, or, preferably, a set of key *messages*. This is another word derived from the Latin – *mittere*, to send. That's what you do with a *message* – you send it, preferably to or at an *audience*.

Designing the right *message* is an industry unto itself. We hire consultants; we conduct surveys; we utilize focus groups. We do these things because we consciously or unconsciously believe in the broadcast model of communication, because it we find precisely the right way to say what the organization wants to say (the *message*), the *audience* (or better yet, the *target audience*) will do what we want them to do and think what we want them to think. And we truly don't need "feedback" because that's not the point, and the *audience* knows full well that it's not the point.

So we spend billions to recruit the best and the brightest into our organizations and we communicate with them like we've told them to check their brains at the door.

So if employees aren't an *audience*, what are they? How might employee communications change, how might we as professional communicators change how we think and what we do, if we think of employees as a *community*, and we think of ourselves as part of that community, and we convince our organizational leadership that it, too, is part of that community?

This is not a simple substitution of the word community for *audience*. The idea here is to rethink the practice of employee communications in the context of community instead of the context of *audience*.

Community is another Latin-derived word – from *communis*, or common ("communication" comes from the same root). And community is about common things – the things we hold in common and have in common that make us distinctive, or at least distinct from other communities of people.

Bob Archibald's essays focus on community as physical or geographic places, which is of limited help in looking at organizations that may have "places" scattered all over the world. But he points out that community is much more than place: "It is a mindset that exists in the people who comprise it." That mindset, he says, is created by places, memories and stories. "Communities are built," he writes, with narrative, built upon shared memory, a sense of the common good as opposed to individual interests, a commitment to the distinctive qualities of a place."

Do we, as professional communicators, know the mindsets of our organizations? If it's difficult enough to know the mindset of the CEO or senior leadership at any given time, how do we deal with a definition of mindset that encompasses hundreds, often thousands, of people?

First, we can start by talking with people. No, not in a structured and facilitated focus group, but one by one. Talking with people implies listening to them, at least for half of the time and preferably for most of the conversation. Find out why they

joined the organization, what do they do, who they are and why they think they are here.

In fact, to borrow an idea from *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, think of the workplace as a conversation, an extended conversation about why the organization exists, where it came from, and where it's going.

Second, we can declare a moratorium on employee opinion surveys for at least a year. Surveys that are constructed on the basis of what's important for the organization or for employee communications will generally be useless. (And if we're honest with ourselves, that's exactly how most surveys are constructed – to find out how well the CEO's message was understood, what people think of the newsletter, or to justify a new communication initiative.) Even when surveys can help, they are no substitute for communicators to go out and talk to people about the things that people believe are important.

Third, we can use communication tools that facilitate community. What if we published the email newsletter as a web log by the editor, one that invited comment without penalty? More than a decade ago, my employer Monsanto did something like this – an email newsletter with conversational articles that invited letters and didn't censor them unless there were personal attacks (of which there were none). The newsletter was created and written to talk with people, not at them. (And yes, we did a survey a year later, and it turned out that the newsletter had the highest credibility of any other communications medium in the company – higher than senior management, higher than bulletin board announcements, and even higher than immediate supervisors.)

Town halls are a communications medium, too – but they're valuable only if people know how to communicate in a town hall meeting. Most of us don't. The town hall concept presupposes the idea of community – and if community's not really there, the town hall is simply an opportunity for the CEO to give a speech. Which is okay, but let's not necessarily confuse a speech by the CEO with effective two-way communication.

So when it comes to the communities where we work, let's bury the broadcast model of communications. Employees are not an audience. They are a community of people who have voluntarily come together for a common purpose. Professional communicators can discover that purpose and celebrate it, and in so doing serve their fellow community members fully and well.

Glynn Young, currently Director, Environmental Communications for Monsanto Company in St. Louis, has more than 30 years experience in employee communications. The most valuable, he says, have been the last five, where he has been unlearning the previous 25. He's received two PRSA Silver Anvil awards, for community relations and employee communications, and two IABC Gold Quill Awards for speechwriting.

Resources

Robert R. Archibald, *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community*; AltaMira Press (1999).

Robert R. Archibald, *The New Town Square: Museums and Communities in Transition*; AltaMira Press, 2004.
