

You're the Boss
The Art of Running a Small Business

Are Your Messages Being Heard?

By **MP Mueller** January 6, 2011 7:00 am

We are at the beginning of another year — that time when we turn a critical eye to what worked and what didn't last year. So let's give some attention to the foundation of all good marketing efforts: interpersonal communication. Think of traditional marketing as air cover but personal communications as the sales maker that wins customers and keeps clients happy and loyal.

I recently visited with Kevin Leahy, founder of Knowledge Advocate. He teaches businesses how to break through communication roadblocks and hurdles to get to what he calls, "the good stuff." His clients include Whole Foods and Goodwill. A conversation with him is like drinking one glass of wine — you find yourself buzzing (with possibilities) and wanting more. Here are some of his suggestions for improving front-line communications and building rapport and trust.

Ask for permission: This is my favorite of his tenets. In any communication — phone, e-mail, in person — ask for permission every two to three minutes. Why? Because every two to three minutes we get to a different place in our talk. Pepper your conversation with little comments like, "May I continue?" or "There is something more I have to say about this, would you like to hear it?" Doing this, Mr. Leahy says, guarantees that the other person is still in the conversation. He led our Door Number 3 team through exercises and for a week afterward we entertained ourselves by asking each other for permission with our hands extended outward. We laughed at each other, but it does make a difference.

Repeat after me: Here's a big mistake many businesspeople make — assuming their point has been totally understood because it didn't elicit follow-up questions. Often, what is really happening is that people aren't fully engaged in what you are saying, which is why they aren't asking questions — and won't

remember what you said. The solution is repetition. As with advertising, most people need to hear something seven times before they acknowledge you've said it. It's the way we are programmed.

Sell yourself as much as your product: Humans are creatures of the gist not the content. We get a sense about something that fits our world view and adapt the information to fit it (think Fox News). We are pattern-making creatures, and the pattern we are always trying to make is the gist. We are not trying to make patterns out of the details. What this suggests is that many customers want to hear why they should buy *you* or your company — not how you are going to deliver your products or services or meet their needs.

Master your body language: Trust is essential in almost every transaction. Often, people pay more attention to the nonverbal messages than the verbal. If we are telling a client that we offer the best solution to some problem, but our voice and body language don't match up, they won't buy it. If you're saying yes while scrunching the skin around your eyes, that scrunch tells people you're not sure. You can correct this by looking your customer dead in the eye, leaning in slightly, and offering firmly, "Yes."

Watch what you say by e-mail: Keep those messages short and sweet and constantly ask for clarification. For example, you can write, "I'm ready to provide you with a full report in the body of this e-mail. Is that good for you or would you prefer to review it as a document or on the phone?" One big warning: "Humor comes across poorly in e-mail and we shouldn't use it," Mr. Leahy says. "It's very context-dependent. You know the saying 'You had to be there'? It's elevated in e-mail."

Do not overwhelm: Most people put three or four points in an e-mail, but we typically only respond to one or two. Why? Because we are in a hurry? Actually, it's more than that. There is evidence that humans can only accept seven bits of information in a moment. If you give us eight, we'll reject them all (see "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two," a paper published in 1956 by George Miller, a Princeton professor). Three is holy — we can all remember three points.

Try smiling: Call centers know this: if you smile, it's hard to speak in an unhappy tone. Try it. Pausing is important, too — it lets people process the information that is critical to getting your point across. One of the biggest

failures in communication is not allowing people the time to process.

I've gone on too long — seven points in a post that probably should have been limited it to three. Which do you think are most important? Do you have anything to add?

MP Mueller is the founder of Door Number 3, a boutique advertising agency in Austin, Tex. Follow Door Number 3 on Facebook.