

Develop presentation to serve meeting content and audience

Because careless use can distort the message, the medium can become a communications problem, writer states.

By RICHARD CAVALIER

This first publication led to 5 years of columns in 2 magazines.

Not uncommon but always unsung are the heroics used to mask the technical production failure of a major business meeting. The specter of just such a technical failure haunts anyone who has responsibility for business meetings. However, the medium can fail but the product may survive on its merits.

At stake in industrial communications is an ivory tower pronouncement that "The medium is the message." It's difficult to imagine what kinds of studies — if deep enough to be meaningful — could have been so uniform and conclusive as to permit Marshall McLuhan to declare another scientific law.

To the contrary, research has increasingly pointed up the difference between the behavior of laboratory subjects and their real-world counterparts. People are — after all — the end point of Mr. McLuhan's dictum. The slogan, naked and unrestricted, is naive.

THE QUESTION is whether industry will overlook a breach of confidence such as a technical failure, and work rationally with communications in the future.

Because the medium can affect perception of a message and — carelessly used — can reshape it beyond recognition, the medium can become the communications problem. Industrial communication is an unnecessary dilemma for many today. As meeting techniques become more complex and more expensive, the messages are becoming harder to

find. That dilemma is eliminated when both the producers and their clients honestly distinguish between medium and message. When assigning relative importance to medium and message, there are only two alternatives, and their ramifications are easy to extend and compare.

Premise No. 1: The medium is the message.

Many audio-visual innovations were developed for the New York World's Fair to titillate mass audiences. Except where their role is identical in the corporate or association meeting room, the innovations are probably out of place. Others of the radical new techniques are essentially gimmicks. They get attention fast, but the transfer of interest to the message is only incidental, certainly not guaranteed and possibly not even measurable.

The man who sells remarkable equipment and splashy techniques will say that's no problem at all; and for a small (additional) sum he can show you the answer, more of the same. Call it *maxi-media* and shove the speaker aside. Everybody likes a circus — but nobody ever comes away with a message . . . unless it's P. T. Barnum's: *There's a sucker born every minute!*

THE HUCKSTER'S machine is his message — it's not yours. Don't blame the huckster. He believes in his machine — and when properly programmed, it might add to the spirit of your meeting. The huckster

often isn't aware that his medium is wrong for your message. Or perhaps — well, when you run a store, you sell what's on the shelf.

MAXI-MEDIA means mini-message in the current scheme of things — if not always, then too often. Maxi-media competes with message, like it or not. It can kill.

It's not that any particular medium — or even multi-media presentation — is a bad thing. Any medium, or any combination of media, can be evaluated only in terms of the contribution made to the clarity of your message; nothing else matters. Cost and beauty are secondary considerations, of little merit in themselves if the message fails to break through the trappings.

Multi-media production is today's programming fad. Like a corner office or a key to the executive washroom, the media are becoming status symbols for middle-management. Ready acceptance is a crutch — an excuse to bypass intelligent evaluation. This bypass is the wrong route. Fad or not, multi-media isn't new as a program segment. It hit the staid world of associations as an integral part of the annual conventions of both the Linen Supply Assn. of America and the Steel Service Center Institute as long ago as 1960.

Integrated multi-media production concepts were developed to support those several-day programs because no single medium would do the whole job. That is still the

criterion used by confident meeting planners.

Premise No. 2: The message is the message.

Meetings have three distinct components: content, presentation, and audience. Presentation techniques — media — are the only really flexible element, and they must be developed or bent to serve the other two.

The reason is simple — conviction is an effect of empathy, rapport, and confidence in the speaker and his message. Whatever enhances the stature of the speaker enhances his message; whatever minimizes or distracts from the speaker steals from his message.

Consider the program element independently:

Content: The message to be conveyed must be comprehensible to the people who will act on it; and therefore it must be:

- 1) Planned and constructed rationally;
- 2) Thought out to explore major ramifications;
- 3) Phrased concisely and explicitly; and
- 4) Presented in a manner conducive to listening, inter-acting, and learning.

Audience: They're the reason the meeting was called. They want to gain from the experience, to understand and react, to feel that their participation matters. They resent being talked down to, to getting bromides in medicine bottles, to seeing money wasted on trivia when they need new tools, bigger budgets or smaller membership fees, and even higher personal income. If a meaningful message is delivered in their language, they will listen and respond. Ideas beget enthusiasm.

Presentation: Because people still identify only with people, the most convincing manner of presentation is still a capable speaker. A featured motion picture or a sociodrama is, in this context, an effaced speaker. Most speakers choose to use visual aids to capture excess brain power — everyone knows retention is highest when both eye and ear are engaged. In small groups, a speaker can deliver a message informally, using printed handouts, charts, and/or cels generated on the overhead projector. In large groups, especially with technical material, visual aids are required to conserve time, magnify small items, and deliver identical concepts or images to everyone.

PRESENTATION techniques must

serve the learning process. Prominent educators and industrial trainers have made significant contributions toward practical application of teaching/learning principles.

"Entertainment has as its goals satisfaction and pleasure in the present moment; adult education's goal is dissatisfaction and change."

Entertainment establishes a relationship of one-way flow of communication from transmitter to receiver; adult education relies heavily on dynamic interaction among the learners and between learners and teachers," Malcom Knowles writes.

"Transmission of learning is made possible only if other elements such as past experience, present motivation, and effective state of the learner provide an appropriate ground to close the sign/symbol circuit by which communication is effected," according to James W. Brown and James Thornton Jr. (See bibliography for further readings.)

How different the emphasis when education — not entertainment — is the fix of a business meeting! And is it shocking that people give different values to comedians, family and jobs? Presentation techniques — machines or people — which exceed the teaching/learning requirements of the speaker and his message are *packaging*.

Packaging is nice. It fills in gaps and lends a pleasing continuity to program segments. Properly used, it helps a poor speaker look professional. Packaging is no substitute for message, and it is highly dispensable.

To evaluate your program's production plan, price the educationally-required visual/live segments separately from the packaging materials. Work only with a producer who understands your message. Unfortunately for the meeting planner who wants to escape responsibility, meeting plan evaluation is not subjective: it's a matter of applied educational principles.

Even at today's prices, a few thousand dollars will buy respectable program components; and \$10,000 per hour will buy an elaborate program, professionally produced, complete. You decide whether the benefits of the packaging are real or imaginary at the prices quoted by your producer.

Through it all, keep a sense of perspective. A superspectacular media show might look good compared to one staged by a personal or divisional rival; yet compared to other promotional tools that could

have been bought with the same packing money, it can be a dog. Management's increasing insistence on take-home information/training kits is tacit acknowledgment that a belly laugh is not necessarily gut involvement.

How much product must be sold at current profit ratios to pay for \$100,000 worth of mishap on stage? When \$100,000 is invested in an off-Broadway show, the backers have a fighting chance to win it back — multiplied! Industrial management wants the same opportunity: A business program talking business language to businessmen. That requires a message, training followup, and value-received . . . so a product can be sold more efficiently, more profitably.

Isn't that what a business meeting is all about? ■

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arthur R. Cohen, *Attitude Change and Social Influence*, (New York: Basic Books, 1964).

Carolyn W. Sherif and Musafer Sherif, editors, *Attitude, Ego Involvement and Change*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967) see monograph by Karl E. Weick.

Carl I. Hovland, Arthur A. Lumsdaine, and Fred D. Sheffield, *Experiment on Mass Communication*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).

Peter Rossi and Bruce Biddle, editors, *The New Media and Education*, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1966), see "Adult Education" by Malcolm S. Knowles.

James W. Brown and James W. Thornton Jr., editors, *New Media in Higher Education*, (Washington: National Education Association, 1963).

Raymond J. Corsini, Malcolm E. Shaw and Robert R. Blake, *Role-playing in Business and Industry*, (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).

B. T. King and I. L. Janis, as quoted by Jansen and Stulurow in "An Experimental Study of Role Playing," *Psychological Monographs*, Volume 76, 1962).

Homer C. Rose, *The Development and Supervision of Training Programs*, (Chicago: American Technical Society, 1964).
(Mr. Cavalier is a free lance writer)

Cost effective media goals

By Richard Cavalier

Responsibility for safeguarding instructional or other communications content of any audiovisual presentation falls squarely on company Audiovisual Specialists. Yet, despite abundant research into AV learning, awards in the trade are still given almost exclusively on the basis of show business principles that celebrate production values and techniques, not communication.

Production bias can cost you your job. The films you rent or design and produce are subject to a production team's conscious or unconscious bias toward purposes and values other than yours. The result can be higher costs, wasted effort for instructors and participants, failed programs, and lost opportunity for the company.

Cost-effective calculations help the AV Specialist steer a course through the shoals of show biz blandishments because the process itself requires that the value of the end result to the company be both specified in advance and verified later. The cost-effectiveness process tends to catch production abuses before they occur. And, by nature, the process encourages comparisons between various mediation techniques and their respective sources. So you tend to get the most for your money.

Let's examine some of these key ideas.

Trade practices: As a judge of industrial film entries for a recent major film festival (film will be used in its generic sense) we saw the award for best film go—by split vote—to the best cinematographic effort. The sets, ensemble acting, lighting, etc., were excellent; and the filmmakers and critics on the judges panel rewarded those technical values.

Unfortunately, however pretty it was to behold, this "instructional" film violated fundamental training principles by featuring not only the cliché right-way/wrong-way approach, but also by using wrong-way almost exclusively throughout the film. Right-way material was tacked on with a film "lecture." From a trainer's viewpoint, this prize-winner was a dog.

Second prize went to a superior training film which contained a most competent and arresting survey of a highly sensitive job-related societal problem. It was by far the better instructional device, although less visually provocative.

Down-graded, this superior instructional film is cheated of the attention it deserved; and that discourages other imaginative entries into the arena of ideas. Once honored, the inadequate instructional film damages the industry by bad example; that of medium over message. Marshall McLuhan was wrong, and his legacy plagues us. About 25 percent of all entries were usable in any serious company program; and 25 percent were embarrassing.

Commissioned films, whether for the company's internal or external use, are subject to the same skewing pressures. Even the prestigious awards of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), for instance, talk of communication but require no proofs that such has occurred in the intended audience. Their asking for "results" does not fulfill the instructional imperatives of observable, measurable and verifiable objectives demonstrably met.

Honoring the principles of AV learning: Communication is commonly defined as comprehension signalled by an appropriate response. If audience response is neither measured nor evaluated, there is no basis whatsoever for claiming successful communication. Applause is irrelevant, a show business indicator of present-moment satisfaction. That, as Malcolm Knowles has indicated, can conflict with instructional goals.

Moreover, despite concerted attempts to prove that "liking goes with learning," no conclusive evidence has been developed on either side.

So any staff AV Specialist must look beyond easy production values to the message itself and to the ability of the target audience to perform as requested using the AV presentation as a tool.

Fortunately, substantial helps are available in the research done over the past dozen or so years, much of it by or with the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) in conjunction with the U.S. Military, as well as by social sciences researchers. (See adjoining story, "Basic Principles".)

Much of the material has been correlated under adult education concepts. Since change (occasionally reinforcement) of performance skills, habits, or attitudes is the general purpose of perhaps all business communications, all marketing, advertising, and even public relations efforts should share the audience-feedback concerns of the corporate trainer. Suddenly, accountability becomes a factor, and nebulous goals (more, better, improved) are seen as self-defeating.

Buying value: Surprisingly, the newest technology, which has in the past helped escalate costs, is now aiding the trend to down-scaling. Three relatively recent developments indicate that a trend toward more modest—but message-oriented—presentations is well

underway.

First, the success of the daily video address by top corporate officers to all employees indicates their openness to the message apart from embroidery. Cost per contact is negligible after installation of the equipment. Keep it short and simple.

Second, computer-aided instruction can relieve people of the more tedious tasks. In addition, computer-generated graphics—including slides—have a built-in bias toward business: the computer can't deliver "cutesie." Some AV modules might be eliminated by the fact of

converting to CAI, yielding savings from several sources.

Third, the growing acceptance of video-conferencing is changing the way we deal with crowds. Video-conferencing can save money despite high initial costs for transmission because of transportation and hotel savings. Time costs: the business relevancy of all broadcast material must be demonstrated. Further, the economical freeze-frame mode cuts the slide count to six-per-minute, not exactly an entertaining blitz.

The pressure to prove the value of

communications programs is growing. Whether the pressure originates with internal budget or external technology is beside the point because the effects are merging: the formats of business communications will increasingly reflect applied learning theory based on research, not slogans.

Cost-effectiveness is here to stay!

In summary: Skill in programming any AV presentation can count for more than budget. That's your challenge. Since related research has indicated that problem-solving is the highest form of creativity, camera angles, jiggles, and applause are aspects of packaging. If packaging is substituted for communications, it is undeniably destructive.

None of this should be construed as a case for dull programs or faulty technique, since discomfort interferes with concentration. But the salient ingredient in persuasion is involvement; and we respond fastest to ideas and processes which affect us. People need to be engrossed, not coddled or entertained. Life is full of tough lessons; and we learn from them... sometimes the first time.

When you treat your AV audience (internal or external) as rational human beings, your effectiveness as a communicator rises while your per-person cost for media and technology declines.

Doesn't that objective justify your re-evaluating AV's easy answers of the past?

Richard Cavalier has summarized his 25 years' experience in designing and producing group communications programs and conventions in "Sales Meetings That Work," published by Dow Jones-Irwin.

FIRST TAKE

Basic principles of AV learning

The following are capsule summaries of published studies; all are in agreement with the training-demonstrated phenomenon of memory reinforcement, retroactive inhibition, and performance-based instruction:

- No significant difference in learning when comparing color to black/white (Joseph Kanner, 1960).
- Entertainment has as its goal present-moment satisfaction. Adult education's goal is present moment dissatisfaction to promote change (Malcolm Knowles, 1966).
- The brain cannot sustain attention in multiple sensory channels simultaneously; it prioritizes and blocks; attention-splitting reduces learning efficiency (Broadbent, 1958, and others).
- Projected written words appeal to the same (left) hemisphere of the

brain as does the spoken word without aiding right-hemisphere conceptualization (Sperry and Gazzaniga, 1967).

- Complexity and expense of the media have less bearing on learning results than does the skill with which various media are used (Kanner/HumRRO, 1971).

- Motion contributes to expense but not necessarily to learning effectiveness (HumRRO, 1971).

- Step-by-step procedure (Programmed Learning) does not necessarily aid conceptual learning (HumRRO, 1971).

- Wrong-way/right-way (the cliché how-to) structure degrades performance because some wrong-way learning takes place (HumRRO, 1971).

- Visual and/or oral "roadmapping" enhances the ability of the ear to comprehend even poorly-organized material (Bransford and McCarrell, 1974, 1979).

- Performance efficiency in sustained tasks involving auditory signals tends to be superior to that in tasks involving visual eye signals (Dember and Warm, 1979).

These studies, together with means of practical application, are discussed at length in Sales Meetings That Work, by Richard Cavalier (Dow Jones Irwin, 1983).