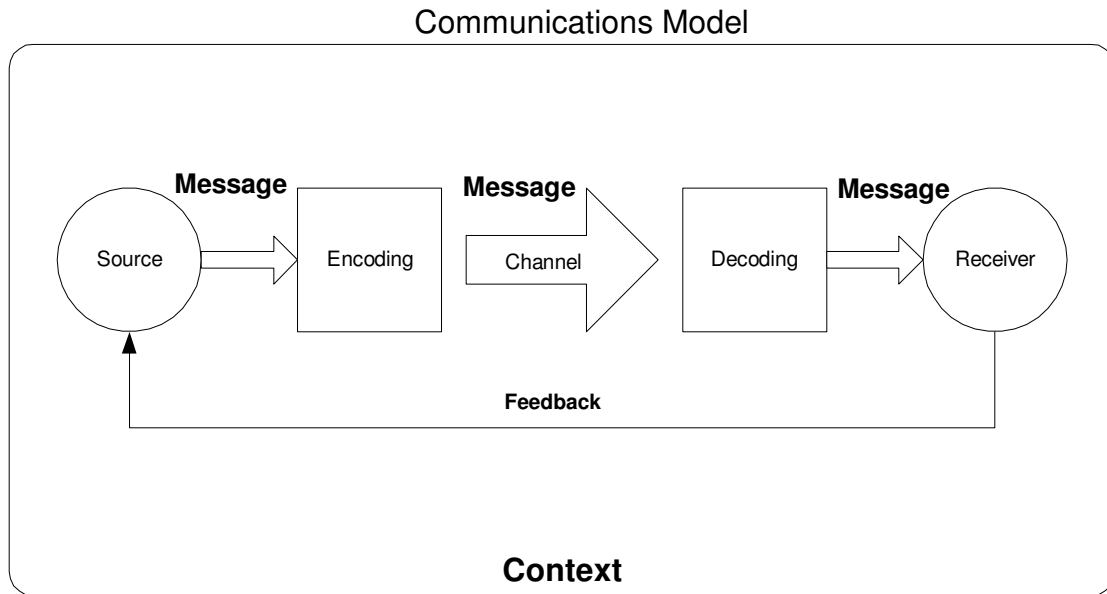


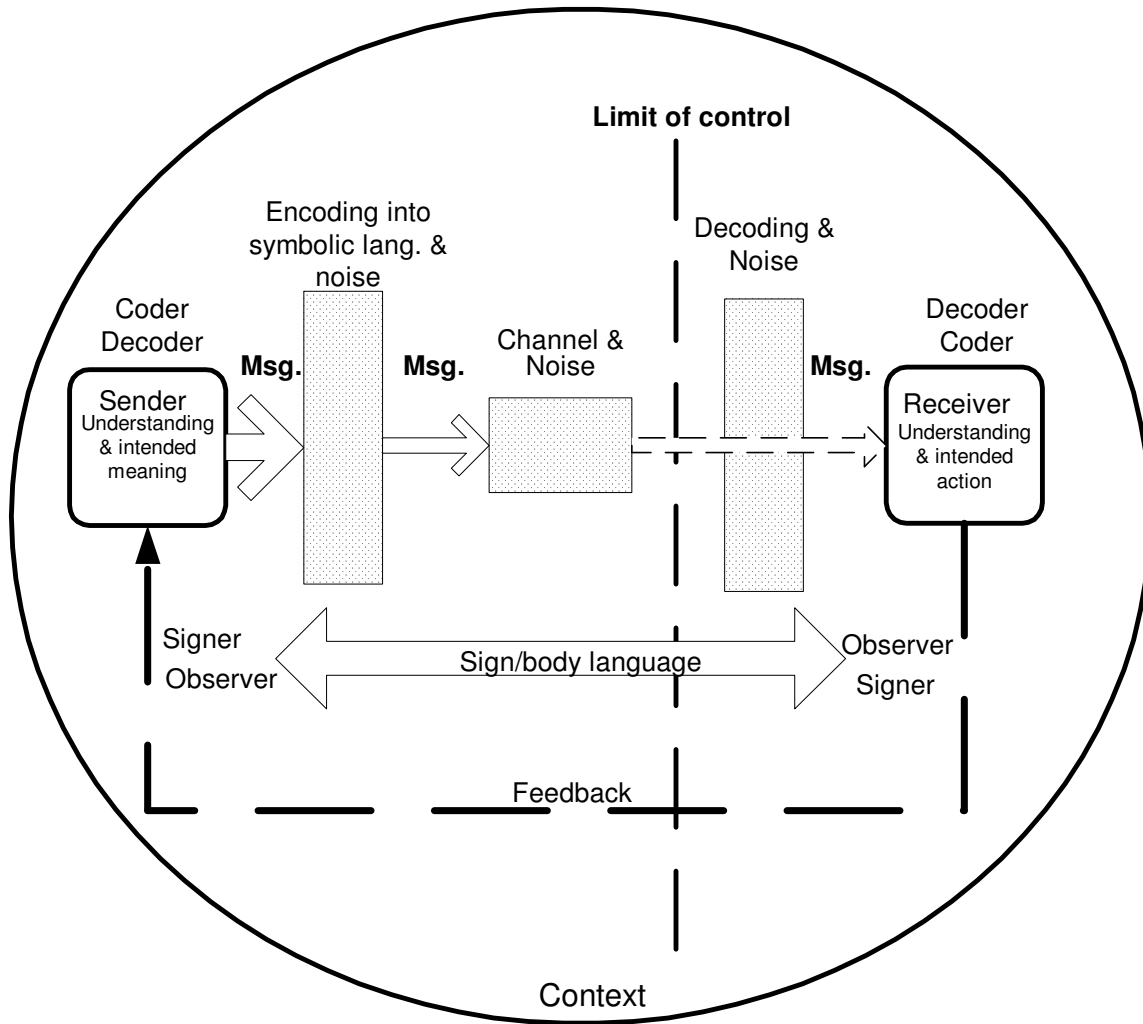
Rethinking A Communications Model

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Most PR practitioners know the communications model. Real communications have more variables. The urge to simplify creates simplistic understanding. In the internet age, traditional communications have less purchase. Mass communications and marketing are dying, and good riddance. New communications and marketing assume participation on the part of message recipients, as there always was. It seems, then, that communications models should change to recognize the era in which we live, an era of greater complexity.

So, what should a communications model look like? It should reflect variables and unknowns that make effective message transmission chancy. Below is one suggestion for a revised model.



Context

Both sender and receiver have to be in a proper context, also called environment, for effective communication to occur. By effective communication, we mean communication that results in action. Each side must have a common understanding or potential to achieve a common understanding. The message-sender can build an environment in which the message is reinforced but the message-receiver may opt out of that environment. For example, everything in an amusement park is optimized for people to have fun and spend money, but one doesn't have to go to the park in the first place. Campaigning for office in an off-year for elections is difficult. Voters aren't engaged. Attempting to motivate employees who know they are going to be laid off soon is nearly futile. While most communicators know how to adjust for context, it cannot be assumed.

Communicators can gain a sense of environment through direct and indirect observation. Presidential campaigns, for example, engage in nonstop polling to identify voter segments and sympathies, based on the environmental impact of the economy, war or other events. Understanding the context in which the voter lives allows candidates to develop and code messages. For most organizations,

however, the ability to determine context is less sophisticated. One uses secondary media, some direct observation and guess-work to determine how the environment might impact the perception of a target audience.

Sender-receiver

A message-sender and message-receiver both must accept that the message-sender has the message-receiver's acceptance to send a message. By that, the message-sender knows he can transmit with an assurance that the message-receiver will accept the message. To do otherwise would be like a tourist in a foreign land. The tourist doesn't speak the language, and locals don't speak the tourist's tongue. Acceptance is denied because message coding is wrong. The message-receiver may also be in a stance where any messages coming from the message-sender is rejected, including pleasantries, because the receiver willfully denies them. Think of a standoff between a CEO and a union. The union might accept a message from the company but not from this CEO at this time. The Paul Newman movie, "Cool Hand Luke" is a situation in which the message-receiver rejects messages sent to him. It produced a classic line, "What we've got here is failure to communicate."

A message-sender is also a message receiver, especially in the internet age, because the message-receiver responds through various media and behavioral actions to indicate whether a message has been decoded and acted upon. The extent of feedback that organizations and individuals receive today is detailed, remarkable and growing. Communications is as much interaction as transmission. In the passing era of mass-media advertising, the concept that one encoded a message and sent it to millions of individuals who decoded and understood it was never correct. Much advertising expenditure was noise because message-recipients did not interact with the message in any meaningful way. Television is rife with ads for automobiles, but how many people remember any one ad for a particular manufacturer?

Understanding and intended meaning

A message coder must have an understanding of the individual to whom he is sending a message. The understanding may be shallow or complex, but it must be sufficient. Based on this understanding, a message-sender renders an intended meaning into symbols the communicator believes the message-receiver can understand. For example, if one is in a land where he doesn't speak the language, he can still convey a desire for food and drink through gestures. Hunger and thirst are global needs. Were the individual on another planet where nourishment is taken in another way, gestures toward the mouth would be futile. It is possible, and often probable, that a message-sender has such a flawed understanding of a message-receiver that any message sent is ignored. A physicist discussing quantum mechanics with a kindergartner is likely to be frustrated.

Strength of Message and Noise

Messages degrade through each step of encoding, channel-passage and decoding due to noise. Noise is a three-fold issue. There is noise within a message and noise that drowns a message and noise when a message is decoded by the receiver. Noise within a message comes from imprecise coding of meaning. That is, a badly written press release might obfuscate meaning rather than clarify it. Or, a rambling unfocused speech might put an audience to sleep rather than grabbing listeners' attention. The second part of noise comes from the environment filled with competing messages. It is estimated that individuals see, hear or experience a thousand advertisements a day. They pay attention to few of them. Messages are part of the background rumble that envelops modern life like the sound of a heating and cooling system in an office building. The noise of air rushing is always there, but we rarely hear it. The challenge of the communications practitioner is to elevate a message above noise such that a targeted individual takes notice. The message-decoder introduces still more noise because of the decoder's understanding and worldview. Any message sent through media is weaker by time it reaches an intended audience, no matter how strongly it started out. The task of the communicator is to make a message robust enough that it remains potent throughout encoding, channel-passage and decoding.

Understanding and intended action

A message receiver must have sufficient understanding to comprehend a message. A kindergartner has not matured yet to grasp even a vague meaning of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. Many adults have not reached enough understanding of physics to grasp the concept either. Hence, any message about the Uncertainty Principle is likely to be lost and not result in meaningful action – e.g., excitement about physics. Taking notice of a message, moreover, is not yet understanding or action. A recipient may become aware of a message only to reject it, or the individual may file away the message as interesting information but not rise to action. The individual who takes notice and acts usually is among a minority of recipients. Political candidates stay on message for extended periods because they know it takes time to filter through noise distracting voters. Candidates who get bored with delivering the same message repeatedly discover that voters don't know who they are or don't understand them. It is no different with a brand campaign.

Codes and signs

Media are symbols or signs. Symbols stand for something else – an encoded meaning. Signs are direct indicators over which one may have little control, such as body language. Visuals, sounds, tastes, touch and smells can be either signs or symbols. Words require a common code understood by message-sender and receiver and a relatively common subtext. Words should express what the message-sender is saying with little distortion. Sub-text should agree with text. The problem with subtext in coding is well known in such things as campaigning for political office. Politicians often use code words that mean something beyond

the text delivered. Pictures require formation of a symbol that is read more or less correctly by a viewer. Pictures can be explicit in meaning or invite a viewer to add his or her own subtext. Sounds can be voluntary –one speaking to another– or involuntary – a groan of pain. So too tastes and smells. The look of pleasure that spreads over one’s face when eating a favorite food is largely involuntary unless one is manipulating another, such as letting Aunt Tillie know her overdone peach cobbler is “tasty.” Buyers of perfume use it to express something about themselves. On the other hand, smelly sneakers are a condition of wear. Codes enter the realms of semiotics and linguistics and are a study unto themselves. Signs and body language are a province of psychology. Communications practitioners are craftspersons. They use codes and signs to send messages and to gain effective action.

Observer and signer

In direct communication, both the message-sender and receiver are signers and observers of signs. With secondary communication, signs are unidirectional from sender to observer. That is why direct communication has and always will have primacy over indirect. Direct communication allows one to “size up” others, to see and sense how they react to a message. Gaining feedback in indirect communication is more difficult. One has to take extra steps, such as surveys.

It is possible for signers to manipulate expression in order to mislead an observer. Thus, the expression, “Never let them see you sweat.” There is another cliché that also applies – a “poker face – a lack of expression and “tells” that give indication to another of what one is really thinking. However, even a neutral expression is an expression of a kind. An observer knows to be wary because the observer cannot estimate the other individual’s reaction.

Control and limit of control

Communicators can control a number of steps in the communications process but not all. Understanding is within their power in that they can learn more about target individuals, subject to economic limits and time. Some organizations work to elaborate levels to determine the demographic, psychographic and other characteristics of target audiences. They are prodigious users of direct observation, surveys and focus groups, and they experiment with new ways to solicit useful information from target groups. Most organizations, however, truncate this step because the perceived cost/benefit isn’t there.

Communicators have control over intended meaning. They refine and distill information until messages are clear and concise. This doesn’t mean it is the right message. It may be a precise message that is wrong for the target audience and the times – e.g., a candidate who wishes to talk about cutting government spending at the time the economy is sinking. Communicators also control coding of a message and the noise level in it. They do this through testing messages with target audiences to see how message-receivers interpret visual, aural and written language. Such message-testing has its own dangers,

however, in that modifying language may result in diluting it. Through practice, communicators also can control to some degree signs and body language. Finally, communicators can control the channels through which messages are sent. There are a large number of options that vary from total control – advertising – to little control – media relations, with credibility levels from low to high. Communicators structure coordinated campaigns to maximize the chance of a message overcoming resident noise and barriers to understanding.

Communicators cannot control environmental noise, the noise in decoding a message, the decoder, the decoder's understanding, the decoder's intended action or the decoder's signs or body language. In other words, while communicators can control large portions of message development and transmission, they cannot control the most important elements in the communications process – the message recipient and the recipient's actions. Communicators can only hope to persuade. Even commands can be turned down by message recipients who ignore imperatives and/or do things their own way.

Implications of a different model

Many underestimate the difficulty of communications and patience needed to achieve effective action. Successful communicators often have a mantra they repeat until they are heard. Successful politicians use a “stump speech.” CEOs talk about key principles that drive a company. Given noise levels in communication, the following rules of thumb hold true:

- **Understand context:** Know where target audiences stand on issues before communicating to them. Are they familiar, unfamiliar with the issue? Are they favorably disposed or not? Will they read into a message what isn't there or accept it at face value?
- **Keep messages simple and accurate.** It takes work to simplify messages without distorting them in the process.
- **Keep messages robust.** Use media that introduce the least amount of noise. Direct communications should be a part of every communications plan.
- **Tailor messages.** As far as possible using modern technologies, tailor messages to individuals so they can apply them easily to their circumstances. This amplifies robustness.
- **Respect the limit of control.** No one can force target audiences to do anything they don't want to do. Understand that and approach communicating in an interactive manner.
- **Always seek feedback.** Unidirectional messages waste time and resources.

Any communications model should reflect the difficulty of making oneself heard because it is closer to reality. Simplistic models have damaged the understanding of what it takes to communicate.

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