

Keep the Main Thing Up Front

If you want people to read your communications, lead with the main message.

By Max T. Russell

The announcement of Dr. Eddson’s new book showed up in my e-mail, sent by a friend with the comment, “I wonder if I could write a book like this.”

“I’m sure you could write a book of your own, and probably better,” I replied, “because I had to read two-thirds of Dr. Eddson’s e-mail before I knew what the book was about.”

Anyone who can’t tell you, up front and clearly, what they’ve written has a serious problem with communication. So let’s look at Dr. Eddson’s problem and learn from it.

First of all, the e-mail meandered through three paragraphs about the importance of “leadership with a fresh perspective.” Then it quoted several leaders who had read at least part of the book and said it was a must-read. They said it was a book for the times we live in and that they were glad someone of Dr. Eddson’s caliber had finally stepped forward to write it.

But I still didn’t know exactly what the book was about. Books on leadership abound.

“Don’t expect your readers to be patient while you ramble.”

Then the e-mail explained how to order the book. Click here, go there, choose the method of payment, and wait for the book to arrive – you know, so you can finally find out what it’s about.

To engage readers, the reason for your communication has to be up front, presented in an intriguing way. How do you do this? One strategy is to start with an excellent result: “The new bridge over River Road is fixed again! And this time we forced the out-of-town engineers to make sure it won’t close for at least another 3,000 years. The faulty support was replaced by one that is now resting firmly on the rock bed, not on the sand.”

Another way is to tease the reader, but only briefly: “If you don’t want to know how to increase the effectiveness of your children’s flu shots, don’t you dare read our booklet, *How to Triple the Flu Shot’s Effectiveness This Year*. Don’t settle for 10% when you can pull a few tricks of your own and boost the power of one of the worst-performing immunizations we’ve seen in years.”



Or you could start with an introduction to a good story: “The only reason Mrs. Beason cut down her neighbor’s big oak tree was because she saw it crack and shift toward her Victorian bungalow while she was sipping lemonade and reading an edition of our newsletter, *The Arborist*. She grabbed her chainsaw from the tool shed and went to work. By the time her neighbor had awakened and gone outside to see where the noise was coming from, Mrs. Beason had avoided a nightmare. “Thanks to the tips I’ve read in *The Arborist*,” she said, “I knew just how to fell that tree. Otherwise, it would’ve landed on my porch instead of his.”

Don’t expect your readers to be patient while you ramble. Create interest right from the start. Then they’re more likely to make time for reading your communications, whatever the format. 



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Say It Like It Is

For more tips on getting your message across with the greatest possible impact, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

How Jargon Undermines Communication (Vol. 27, No. 2)

What the Heck Are You Trying to Say? (Vol. 34, No. 2)

Cynicism Rx: Authentic Communication (Vol. 24, No. 6)

Truth Is Better than Hype (Vol. 35, No. 1)

11 Communication Keys that Will Change the Way You Lead (Vol. 14, No. 2)

How to Fix Communication Breakdowns (Vol. 29, No. 1)