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How this guide can help you run your building business

A lot of time and money can be wasted through poor communication between building business owners and operators on the one hand and their clients on the other.

This guide explains how you can communicate better with your clients by providing a list of:

- **Tips** you can use; and
- **Traps** you need to avoid.
Some tips for improving communication between your business and its customers include:

- Don’t destroy your brand
- Don’t be afraid to speak up
- Use “active listening”
- Plan ahead
- Keep a record
- Be aware of “non-verbal” communication (“body language”)
- Be aware of “verbal” communication (“paralanguage”)
- Be aware of different personality types

From “An Introduction to Branding Your Business (Jan 2011)” we have seen that the brand (or “identity”) of your business includes its:

- Core values & beliefs – what it will and won’t do (this relates to what qualities you want your business to be known for); and
- Capacity – what it can and can’t do (this relates to what you can and cannot promise).

We have also seen that one of the secrets to a successful brand is that it is relevant to a business’s customers (both actual and potential).

So, it follows that a customer will choose one business over another because s/he wants what that business says it can deliver.

Remember to make sure that what your business promises is the same as what it actually delivers.
Don’t be afraid to speak up

Communication is a two-way street. There’s no point in one person giving a message if the other person doesn’t understand the message.

Many people don’t speak up for fear of “appearing stupid”.

Why do they assume the problem is theirs? Why don’t they assume that the other person isn’t very good at explaining or describing something?

At the end of the day, it doesn’t really matter why the communication between your business and its customers isn’t working, what matters is that you make sure it does work.

Your business depends on it.

Therefore, as soon as you can, tell the other person that you don’t understand some of what s/he is saying and ask him or her to explain it again.

By speaking up and asking the other person to repeat what they have just said, you are giving:

> the other person a chance to explain themselves differently (or better); and

> yourself the benefit of avoiding a potential misunderstanding later on down the track.

Use “active listening”

Essentially, active listening is shorthand for “responding to something that someone has just said in a way that lets them know that you are both ‘on the same page’”.

Have you heard of the saying “don’t just be honest, but be seen to be honest”? Well, active listening is a similar concept, only it would be described as “don’t just listen, but be known to be listening”.
Active listening doesn’t mean having to sound like a parrot, repeating everything that someone says “word for word". Being able to successfully use active listening involves:

> **first of all** – a degree of empathy for the other person; and

> **secondly** – the ability to give the other person the feeling that you are aware of and have understood both:

  > the “**face value**” message (i.e. the facts); and
  > the “**underlying**” message (i.e. the emotions), in what they have written or said.

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**case study**

During dinner, your client calls and leaves the following (angry) message on your voicemail “I drove past the house this afternoon and saw the dreadful job you did on the rendering. Don’t do anything more until we’ve resolved this issue”.

From this message, you assume that your client isn’t aware of the concept of the “normal viewing angle” when inspecting building work and saw the rendering work in “non-critical light” (i.e. when the sun was setting).

Before making contact with the client, be aware that s/he wants:

> to find out whether the rendering work is in fact defective (the “face value” message); and

> some sort of acknowledgement from you that he was justified in reacting the way he did (the “underlying” message).
Use “active listening”

If you don’t address both of these issues, your client will be less likely to accept your explanation in relation to the quality of the rendering.

Acknowledging that the client is upset can be as simple as opening the conversation with, “You sounded upset in your message and I am guessing that this is because the rendering looked uneven.”

Your client may or may not (depending on his mood) elaborate on what he saw. If he does, you are best off waiting until he has finished and is waiting for your explanation.

You can then say words to the effect that:

“This is quiet common with rendering work, because you saw it in what we call ‘non-critical light’. When inspecting rendering work, you need to look at it from what is described as a ‘normal viewing angle’.

If you like, I can meet you on-site and show you what I mean.”

It would also help if you took a copy of HIA’s “Guide to materials & workmanship for residential building work”) to the meeting to support what you are saying.

Used properly, active listening will result in the other person being more willing to negotiate a suitable outcome, because they will be feeling that whatever solution or outcome you suggest will address all of their concerns.

You will find active listening especially valuable for those situations that look as though they could easily end up in a dispute.
Plan ahead

As you already know, a building job consists of a chain of events, where one event depends on the other having been completed. Any change to this chain of events will probably have an impact on your business in terms of both time and money.

If the outcome of any given communication is for you to do something extra or different for your client, you need to make sure that, before you commit to it, you make them aware of the effect it will have on the overall scheme of things.

You will only be able to do this if you have planned ahead and thought through:
- what the possible outcomes could be; and
- the effect of each of these outcomes on your building program (and business).

Keep a record

As a matter of good business practice, you need to keep records of all of your client communications.

The kind of records you need to keep can range:
- from – being a file copy of a letter or email that your business has sent to another person.
- to – being a hand-written diary entry of a telephone conversation.

Sometimes, you have to create a written record for legal reasons. For example, your client asks you to move a door to a place that is not shown on the plans. At law, this is a request to vary the terms of the contract.

From a practical point of view, a written record is the only reliable way to prove that a communication actually took place.

If the contract that you entered into in the first place is a regulated contract, then, you’ll have to make sure the variation is in writing so you can get paid.
Be aware of “non-verbal” communication

“Non-verbal” communication is simply another phrase for “body language”.

It helps to be able to read your audience to be able to know how to deliver your message.

For example, if you are boring the person you are talking to, then it’s highly unlikely they will be listening to what you are saying, unless you change the way you talk to make your message more interesting.

If you don’t realise that your audience is bored (or you do realise it, but just don’t do anything about it), then your message will be lost, no matter how important you think it is.

The list below gives an example of how, depending on the other body language that is being used by a person, someone sitting with their chin resting in their hand can mean very different things¹.

> Eyes glazed, hand being relied upon to support the weight of the head, with a slightly slumped body – **Boredom**.

> Crossed legs, head down, body turned-away, leaning back, one eyebrow lower than the other, constricted pupils – **Disagreees and won’t be persuaded otherwise**.

> Sitting back, hands behind head, sitting with one leg at right angles to the other (ankle of one leg placed across the top of the knee of the other leg) – **Superiority**.

> Leaning forward, head slightly tilted, dilated pupils and hand not being used for any weight-bearing of the head – **Interested and open to suggestions**.

> It is handy to know a little bit about body language, because it will give you some clues about how to deliver a message to your audience in a way that is most likely to be heard and understood by them.

Be aware of “verbal communication”

Another name for “verbal communication” is “paralanguage”. By way of example, the following is a list of suggestions made by Dr Len Sperry\(^2\) as to how different ways of speaking can mean different things\(^3\).

- Monotone Voice – Boredom
- Slow speed, low pitch – Depression
- High voice, emphatic pitch – Enthusiasm
- Ascending tone – Astonishment
- Abrupt speech – Defensiveness
- Terse speed, loud tone – Anger
- High pitch, drawn-out speed – Disbelief

Just as each type of non-verbal communication (or “body language”) tends to give clues as to the person’s state of mind or attitude towards you, so do different types of verbal communication (or “paralanguage”).

Be aware of different personality types

We all know that not everyone is the same. But how you handle different personality types isn’t as easy to work out.

There are many different theories about personality types, ranging from the Type A & Type B personalities (used in the 1950’s as an indicator of whether someone is likely to have a heart attack) to theories that characterize people according to different personality traits, such as the DISC Profile.

These theories say that, once you have identified what “personality type” a person is, you will have a better understanding of how to communicate with them because different personality types tend to communicate in different ways.

\(^2\) Developing Skills in Contact Counseling (Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley, 1975) at page 40
\(^3\) People Skills: How to assert yourself, listen to others, and resolve conflicts Robert Bolton Ph.D, Simon & Shuster, Australia © Prentice Hall of Australia Pty Limited, 1986 at page 82 - 83
2 Traps you need to avoid

The following are common traps\(^\text{1}\) that need to be avoided if you don’t want any misunderstandings to occur in the future (because, as we all know, misunderstandings often lead to conflict and ultimately, dispute).

**Letting yourself get distracted**
For example, you may be distracted by something:
> the other person said – and you don’t understand it or you find it more interesting than anything that has been said so far;
> you are about to say; or
> totally unrelated to the topic of conversation – for example, the fact that one of the client’s eyes is blue and the other one is brown.

**Interrupting the other person**
For example, you:
> think that what you’re about to say is far more important than what the other person is saying;
> like to hear the sound of your own voice;
> think you know what the other person is going to say; or
> are running late for another appointment.

**Letting your emotions interfere**
For example, if you have taken a dislike to someone, you’ll probably put a negative spin on everything they say, and possibly misinterpret the whole situation.

**“Selective hearing”**
This is another way of saying that someone “only hears what they want to hear”.

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\(^1\) Effective Communication Daniel Kehoe, © 2007, McGraw-Hill Australia Pty Limited
For more information, you can contact HIA by phone: 1300 650 620 or by email: enquiries@hia.com.au