

Marketing your message through clarity and relevance

The story so far...

Our 'hero' has been given a last minute "invitation" to stand-in for a bed-ridden boss. The task? To open a regional sales managers meeting. The topic? The Quality programme. Where? Across the harbour. When? In 20 minutes.

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You sit on the Star Ferry, mopping your brow. Humidity or nervousness? Probably a bit of both.

But why nervousness? You know the topic backwards. You spoke about it to the manufacturing managers meeting only two weeks ago. And you've already decided on the simple structure for organizing your ideas; the time-based or clock plan, as Keith Spicer calls it.

So what's the problem?

The problem, you suddenly realize is that you can't use the same approach as you did for the manufacturing team. It won't fly. The sales managers will be bored stiff.

You need an angle, an approach that will grab, and keep their interest. You need to market, not sell, your message.

You recall that in the "Think on Your Feet" workshop they suggested you do a three minute brain scan grid of your listeners. As best you recall, it had to do with jotting down what you imagine will be in their minds about this topic, if anything; their preconceptions, hopes, fears, prejudices and concerns.

So, you jot down quickly what you think is their thinking about Quality. You look back over your notes and conclude, unhappily, that the sales managers are unlikely to have any interest at all in Quality. After all, it's a production issue, isn't it? At best, it applies to back-office procedures.

But you know it's not just that. Customer surveys reveal "satisfaction" with your sales team - but that's all. You need "excellence", and a distinctive competitive advantage from the field sales force.

And the customers are telling you how to get it. They've nominated, as high priorities, new product information, proposal accuracy and project management as three critical areas. These after all, you muse, are processes in the sales functions and quality is about managing processes for predictable outcomes, including customer satisfaction.

Some core themes, or angles, start to surface for you and you note them down.

- Quality and sales
(a bit dull)
- Quality has nothing to do with sales, does it?
(more challenging)
- Customer relationship management: the next frontier for quality
(O.K.?)
- Quality in sales. An idea whose time has come
(so-so)
- The quality journey: from the factory to finance to the field
(nice alliteration)

You wish you had another half hour to improve on these choices. You don't. But you have managed to angle your ideas in the audience's direction. Isn't that what the advertising people call positioning?

So you decide to go with the factory/finance/field theme. That would suit your "clock" structure nicely. First, hit them with your headline which suitably signals your storyline. Start with the origins of Quality in the factory and the benefits which accrued. Then move to show how these principles were applied in finance and administration, with spectacular results. With any luck, by the time you come to make your point — the field application — they're already making connections, and thinking about how to apply these ideas. Challenge them, recap your theme, and sit down. That should work.

You think to yourself: "Not too bad for 15 minutes preparation, eh?" Why you might even have hit the double: clarity and relevance.

Canadian Keith Spicer created the Think on Your Feet (TM) workshop several years ago. Today, the world-wide delivery of these very successful workshops is managed by Toronto-based Think on Your Feet International Inc. In the Asia Pacific they work through Ken Everett Pty Ltd, PO Box 1015 Neutral Bay, NSW Australia 2089, tel: 61-2-909-3218, fax: 61-2-909-1110.

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