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MYSTERY, SURPRISE, AND DISCOVERY: THE NEGLECTED POWER OF INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

ABSTRACT Indirect communication often outperforms and achieves deeper and longer-lasting results than does direct communication, especially when the intended audience might be expected to resist at least some portion of the proposed message. While direct communication generally focuses on the cognitive abilities of a target audience, indirect communication tends to focus instead on the imagination and the will. This chapter explores the chief differences between direct and indirect communication, identifies when and in what contexts indirect communication functions especially well in business environments, and suggests several creative possibilities in those contexts for conveying potent, effective messages through indirect communication.

Introduction

Although the National Football League's Baltimore Ravens won the football portion of Super Bowl XLVII, a cookie won the day's online marketing contest. And it didn't do so by saying, "Buy me if you're hungry."

When a power outage interrupted the 2013 game for more than half an hour, marketers working for Oreo saw an opportunity. The company's fifteen-person social media team, comprised of copywriters, a strategist, and artists, quickly prepared and posted a clever ad on Twitter that almost instantly went viral. "Power out?" the ad asked. "No Problem." The ad showed a barely-lit Oreo sandwich cookie along with the caption, "You can still dunk in the dark."

The ad quickly garnered nearly 15,000 retweets, and since an average Twitter account has around 200 followers, that could mean some three million viewers saw the ad within moments of its appearance (Cameron, 2013).

The president of the digital marketing firm that directed Oreo's effort declared, "Once the blackout happened, no one was distracted—there was nothing going on. The combination of speed and cultural relevance propelled it to the forefront" (Watercutter, 2013). *Wired* magazine noted that traditional advertisers paid nearly \$4 million to run a single commercial during the game, so "having a brand respond in real-time on social media is a clever way to reach people on smartphones and computers—particularly when a survey prior to the game found that about 36 percent of Super Bowl viewers would be consulting a second screen" (Watercutter, 2013). And Jonah Berger, author of the 2013 book *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*, noted, "The Super Bowl channel is very saturated. I think a retweet is much more engaged, it is suggesting that the audience is not only processing this message but actively engaging with the message and selecting the message to pass on to

their friends. That said, is this going to sell more Oreos at the end of the day? Hard to tell. [But] it definitely makes the brand seem like a more clever, more interesting, sharp brand. So in terms of brand equity this is as effective, if not more effective, than just showing another Super Bowl ad” (Watercutter, 2013).

Through a creative and artful use of indirect communication, the cookie company bested its competitors. In tribute to the clever effort, *Wired* congratulated Oreo with a memorable line of its own: “In other words, touchdown: Oreo” (Watercutter, 2013).

Direct vs. Indirect Communication

Many businesses pride themselves on making their communications direct, clear, forthright, and to the point, whether with their customers or within the company. They try hard to cultivate a reputation as “straight shooters” who will “tell it like it is.” And very often, such clear, direct communication works very well.

Until it doesn’t.

In such cases, indirect communication often works more effectively and achieves deeper and longer-lasting results than direct communication. So what are the chief differences between direct and indirect communication? When and in what contexts does indirect communication function well in business environments? And what does such indirect communication look like in practice?

Direct communication

Direct communication excels at transmitting information, facts, and objective content through what might be called “blunt talk” or “straight shooting.” It generally focuses on the cognitive abilities of the individual for whom the communication is intended, targeting the mind rather than the imagination or the will. Messages communicated in this mode often are effective to the degree that the speaker’s position of authority is accepted.

This means that if the primary reason for some communication is the dispensing of information, then direct communication is probably the most effective strategy. When an individual doesn’t know some necessary fact or datum, then direct communication usually is the best option. If a fire breaks out in a building, for example, the endangered inhabitants don’t need a story about flames; they need to know how to immediately evacuate the burning structure. They need facts and clear instructions, not riddles or mysterious statements.

Indirect communication

The strength of indirect communication comes not in relaying new facts, but in helping individuals to grasp some truth they might erroneously believe they already understand. It therefore does not focus on conveying additional information, but rather seeks to overcome some hindrance to a better comprehension of information already conveyed.

If direct information targets the mind, then indirect communication focuses on the imagination and the will. Therefore it hints, insinuates, and suggests rather than speaks bluntly. To be effective, it must be artful in its use of various communicative devices, such as humor, ambiguity, fictional narratives, imaginative constructions, and concealment.

Indirect communication is designed to arrest attention and prompt hearers to change how they think about something. It uses “riddles” or “dark sayings” to provoke hearers to

embrace some idea or take action on some product. It tries to make the familiar strange in order to unsettle the hearer and prompt him or her to actively reflect on the implications and ramifications of accepting some concept, especially for his or her own life.

In indirect communication, an effective message does not depend on the speaker's authority; instead, hearers discover or "give birth" to meaning on their own. Indirect communication fosters an active, discovery kind of learning and therefore doesn't explicitly say (at least at first) what the speaker wants the hearer to learn or do—which means it also tends to be more susceptible to misunderstanding or confusion than direct communication. It is connotative rather than denotative. It provokes thought or reflection so that the hearer is actively engaged in making sense of the product or idea and deciding on his or her own its value and what action to take.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard illustrated the primary difference between direct and indirect communication when he imagined a man who had stuffed his face so full of food (a metaphor for "information") that he could not take in another morsel. The man was starving to death, but not for lack of food. The only way to help the dying man, Kierkegaard argued, was to take some food out of his mouth so that he could chew and swallow. The man didn't need more food; he needed a greater ability to profit from the food he already had.

In the same way, in some situations it does not help to provide more information to people who already have their mouths (or brains) full. They already have more than enough information; in fact, they cannot properly digest the information they already have. That is why it doesn't help simply to offer more information, and in fact, such a strategy can be counterproductive. People in this situation don't need more information, but a greater ability to understand the facts they already have and so to act appropriately upon that information. Indirect communication therefore does not seek to provide additional information so much as to prompt a new way of thinking about information already possessed.

When Is Indirect Communication Most Useful?

Indirect communication can be very useful when an audience resists some message, or when the audience believes it understands something that, in fact, it doesn't. The strategy works in part by preventing an audience from "arming its defenses" against an unwelcome message. Indirect communication thus may be an effective strategy when members of an audience want to obscure some truth that the communicator wants to bring to light or when the audience is emotionally ill-disposed toward some message.

Second, indirect communication may work well when an audience already has enough information to act wisely, but for some reason has chosen instead simply to amass more information. Indirect communication, creatively presented, can prompt an audience to take action when merely giving that same audience additional data will lead only to continued inaction.

Third, indirect communication may work well to raise awareness around an issue that otherwise would tend to remain in the shadows. Creatively designed indirect communication can command attention when the plain-spoken methods of direct communication get persistently ignored.

In what business contexts, then, might it make sense to develop an indirect message for an audience rather than a direct one? Consider a few possible scenarios (think of the list as suggestive rather than exhaustive):

- *Difficult employee reviews.*
- *Change of company vision/ownership/leadership.*
- *Delivery of bad news.*
- *Crucial commercial advertisements in a crowded market.*
- *Rebuilding trust after a challenging episode.*
- *Repairing a damaged corporate image.*

In each of these situations, some barrier likely must be overcome or some illusion has to be removed. Perhaps a valuable employee has resisted making some needed change described in a previous performance review, or a large product recall has damaged a company's reputation, or consumers have grown weary of and perhaps resistant to "normal" advertisements after a barrage of such messages (remember Oreo)? In such cases, the audience likely does not need more information, so much as an alternate way of perceiving the information it already has.

How It Works

Successful indirect communication generally has four key features that, working together, enable a message to get past some obstacle or overcome some illusion in order to bear fruit. The following does not lay out a sequential four-step process so much as it describes four key elements present in every successful attempt at indirect communication.

Grab attention. When you see resistance, either real or perceived, to you, your instructions, your company, or your product, then indirect communication can be a very useful strategy. A "frontal assault" that utilizes direct communication typically has little chance of success with an audience that resists your message.

Suppose that a manager must give a valued subordinate a negative review in regard to some specific aspect of the employee's work—and not for the first time. For whatever reason, the subordinate has consistently resisted making the required change; and while the manager does not want to lose the employee, the change must occur. Indirect communication can often work better than direct communication in such a challenging scenario.

Several years ago, an acquaintance who often served as a business consultant got involved in just such a situation. A small corporation had asked him to spend a few days on-site, and while there, he got recruited to intercede with a manager who, contrary to many instructions and pleas from colleagues, continued to work such long hours that he was having an overall negative effect on the company. Decades before, the consultant and the manager had enjoyed a teacher-student relationship, so each knew the other quite well. The consultant agreed to speak to the man.

One day as the pair drove to a work site, the consultant turned to the manager and said, "Bill, I noticed that you don't smoke." The deeply religious manager, very puzzled, replied, "Well, no . . . of course not." The consultant merely nodded his head.

A little later, the consultant said again, "Bill, I see that you really don't smoke." Bill turned to his mentor and answered, "No, I've already told you that." This time, the man's puzzlement nearly turned to irritation. And again the consultant said no more.

After the pair had inspected the site and returned to their car, the consultant turned to Bill and said, “Bill, you’ve told me twice that you don’t smoke. May I ask, why not?”

“Honestly, Jim,” the exasperated man said, “You know that I consider my body to be God’s temple.”

“Riiiiight,” his mentor answered, “so I suppose that’s why you’ve been working 80 hour weeks, destroying yourself and driving everyone around you crazy?”

The message finally got through. Bill changed his behavior, enabling the company to regain its corporate health.

Do not immediately reveal your purpose. Indirect communication works largely through surprise and discovery, and that means the goal or purpose of the communication must remain hidden or cloaked, at least at first. The recipients of the message must first be coaxed into an inquisitive state, in which they consciously puzzle over the message, before any new discovery can occur. The communicator does not therefore explicitly or implicitly tell the audience what it is supposed to learn or decide. Aumann (2010), explains, “the indirect communicator does not tell the learner exactly what the outcome of the learning process is supposed to be. Instead, the indirect communicator provides the learner with a puzzle or problem that the learner must figure out for himself or herself” (p. 302). A recent event illustrates how this works.

The largest U.S. television audience of all time, estimated at 111.5 million viewers, tuned in to the 2014 Super Bowl, in which the Seattle Seahawks dismantled the Denver Broncos in the NFL’s marquee event (Harnick, 2014). Twitter registered nearly 25 million tweets about the game, another record. One of those tweets, from the J.C. Penney company, left a vast number of observers scratching their heads. Soon after the game started, the company tweeted the following message:

“Who kkmew this was gohing tob e a baweball ghamle. #lowsscorinh 5_0”

About half an hour later, the company tweeted a second message:

“Toughdown Seadawks! I sSeattle going toa runaway wit h this!!!”

The Twitter universe and the blogosphere almost immediately lit up, cynically wondering whether J.C. Penney had allowed an intoxicated fan to represent it on the Internet, or whether some hacker had taken control of its Twitter account in order to embarrass the company. Elis Isquith of *Salon* no doubt spoke for many when he wrote, “So, JC Penney’s not really where most folks are going to get their Super Bowl commentary, but whoever’s running things for the department store’s Twitter account figured they might as well weigh in anyway. What could go wrong, right? Well, it’s not quite an ‘epic fail’—no racism, misogyny, or any other kind of ignorant bigotry—but it’s still definitely fair to say this isn’t how these tweets were intended to go out” (Isquith, 2014). Isquith then passed along some “friendly corporate teasing” from Kia Motors, which itself had tweeted, “Hey @jcpenny need a designated driver?” (Isquith, 2014).

A few minutes later, a J.C. Penney representative took to Twitter once more to post the following message: “Oops . . . Sorry for the typos. We were #TweetingWithMittens. Wasn’t it supposed to be colder? Enjoy the game! #GoTeamUSA.” The message included a photo of a pair of hands encased in mittens, trying to text on a smart phone. Isquith soon updated his story to say, “JC Penney now says that mittens were to blame. . . Sure, JC Penney. Sure” (Isquith, 2014). The unconvinced *Salon* editor had skeptical company. The following day, Aimee Picchi for *Moneywatch* wrote an article titled “JC Penney’s

Super Bowl Tweets Backfire.” She called Penney’s attempt to pique interest in its mittens “a head-scratcher” and wrote:

On the one hand, J.C. Penney managed to bring attention to a clothing item that generally doesn’t make headlines. And the mixed-up tweets got people talking about the retailer and its social-media strategy, although the reception was a mixed bag of positive and negative views.

Still, that’s a definite improvement from the past year, when headlines have focused on the company’s declining sales, an ousted CEO and retailing mishaps (Picchi, 2014).

Picchi also quoted the official explanation given by J.C. Penney: “We knew Twitter would be very active but wanted to find a way to stay above the Super Bowl fray and instead create our own narrative” (Picchi, 2014). But what sort of narrative did the company actually create? Picchi concluded that generating “a unique narrative is nevertheless a far cry from Oreo’s game stealing tweet [in 2013], which was both clear and clever. J.C. Penney’s message appears to be, ‘Don’t type while wearing mittens.’ That’s not exactly a compelling reason to buy a pair” (Picchi, 2014).

The J.C. Penney Twitter episode illustrates clearly both the power and the limitations of indirect communication. Although the corporation’s puzzling tweets generated a lot of attention (more than 20,000 retweets) and brought an instant media response, a large percentage of that attention probably cannot be considered corporately helpful. The most effective indirect communication usually has some clear connection between the initial “mystery” and the finally-revealed intent of the message. In the 2013 Oreo tweet, for example, the intended message is something like, “Oreos and milk are always a good treat, whether in the dark or in the light.” The J.C. Penney’s ad, however, had no such positive connection between its mittens and the game, and so many observers did not see the ad as clever or fun, but as merely odd.

The purpose of concealment in indirect communication, Aumann suggests, is to prevent the misdirected audience from realizing the final purpose of the communicator. The hope is that the communicator will thereby avoid setting off the audience’s defense mechanisms and hence gain the opportunity to make the audience aware of something it would rather not consider. “If the communicator comes right out and announces the agenda,” Aumann writes, “the audience will work against him or her. It will see the direct communicator coming and arm its defenses appropriately” (2010).

At the same time, however, the very nature of indirect communication makes it more open to varied interpretations. The mysterious nature of the message—required to bypass barriers or clear away illusions—means that the audience may not, in the end, understand or accept the message the communicator wished to convey. Genuine creativity is required to give the message its best chance at success; mere cleverness may succeed at getting a hearing for the message, but fail to secure a positive response to it.

Make the familiar strange. In a 1917 essay titled “Art as Technique,” Viktor Shklovsky coined the term “defamiliarization” to refer to the literary process of making something very familiar seem quite unfamiliar, so that audiences could perceive the well-known thing in a fresh light (Rivkin and Ryan, 2004). To defamiliarize something does not mean to make it seem weird or completely alien, but rather to provoke an unexpected perspective on it that allows an audience to approach it in a new way, thus permitting new insights to take shape.

In a very similar way, one aim of indirect communication is to set an audience free of earlier perceptions and so to allow it to reevaluate some familiar situation and to make a

decision about that situation without previous entanglements, whether emotional or intellectual. To do this, indirect communication often tries to take something away before it can address the real issue. This “taking away” is a form of defamiliarization, of taking something familiar and reintroducing it in a new context and new way, so that it may become more acceptable.

Authors have long used a form of defamiliarization to gain a hearing for ideas that the general public or its thought leaders considered unacceptable. Jonathan Swift wrote *Gulliver’s Travels* to critique the politics of his day, as did George Orwell many years later with his own *Animal Farm*. Many science fiction writers continue to use some form of defamiliarization, using imaginary alien worlds to comment on contemporary situations.

Advertisers frequently use a similar technique to gain a hearing for new or revised products. George Eastman, who invented an easy-to-use camera in the late 1800s, had to convince a skeptical public that his invention made taking pictures easy. To remove the illusion that taking photographs was a difficult and laborious process, as it always had been until then, he wrote a clear but indirect advertising slogan that set the bar for decades to come: “You press the button, we do the rest.” Eastman didn’t try to explain how his camera worked or how the Kodak differed mechanically from the complicated devices of his day; he simply defamiliarized the whole process of photography through one simple but potent line (Lindsay, 2006).

Steve Jobs and Apple Computers managed a similar feat more than a century later in the celebrated “Get a Mac” advertising campaign that ran from May 2006 to October 2009 (Nudd, 2011). To distinguish its computers from the more common and generally cheaper PCs, Apple did not trot out superior technical specifications or compare computing times or highlight other performance metrics. Instead, it featured two young adult males as personifications of the two kinds of computers: One, a pudgy, bespeckled, suit-wearing bumbler (the PC); the other, a slender, hip, informal, savvy ace (the Mac). Using humor, irony, clever comparisons highlighting the PC’s shortcomings as opposed to the Mac’s strengths—and perhaps, above all, a consistent, gentle tweaking of the PC’s anthropomorphic nose—the campaign won a huge cultural following, as well as *Adweek*’s award as the best advertising campaign of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The campaign also provided a master example of defamiliarization through advertising. The first time the two characters appeared on screen, in front of a white background lacking any special effects, viewers would have no way to know that the slender, hip young man represented the Mac while the pudgy, clueless fellow represented the PC. PC admirers had no visual or audio clues to suggest that the ads would, in fact, skewer their beloved machines. In addition, the two men talked to each other and not to the viewing audience, as if viewers overheard something not intended for them—another way to disarm defenses. The television ads did not present additional information so much as try to set a different tone for the debate between PCs and Macs. So did the ads work? Sixty-six television spots and many years later, *Adweek*, at least, answered with a resounding, “yes!”

Target the imagination, not the mind. One of the major goals of indirect communication is to gain an emotional and psychological foothold with an audience in order to get a fair hearing for some resisted message. Most of the time, this means focusing on creative ways to engage the imagination and the emotions, rather than on challenging the mind with new facts. It also means the audience will decide the issue for itself.

The indirect method always and deliberately leaves something out of the communicative activity, so that the recipients of the communication must complete the meaning of the

message on their own. This explains why the use of humor, questions, story, irony, satire, and other provocative devices are used to get the person involved in creating meaning. In this way, the communicating individual is seen primarily as an artist and a creative person. Meaning is not *provided* so much as *provoked*, in a setting that gives the audience the best chance to come to a fair conclusion.

In the mid-1980s, Iowa was languishing economically. Two state legislators hoped that a limited form of gambling might help improve their state's financial climate, and so proposed legislation to legalize it. The first time they tried, "nobody took them seriously" and one of the legislators said that people "literally laughed us out of town" (Duffy, 1997). Just a few years later, however, Iowa became the first Midwest state to sanction riverboat gambling. How did the tide turn so quickly?

Duffy undertook a "fantasy theme analysis" using principles developed in Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT), a conceptual framework that "helps explain broad aspects of interpersonal, small group, public, organizational, mass, and intercultural communication" (Bormann et. al. 2001). SCT attempts to account for "those dramatizing, communicative processes that create and sustain a community" and seeks to explain "the development of shared fantasies that coalesce into a rhetorical vision (the shared symbolic ground exhibited by a vision's participants)" (Bormann et. al. 2001).

Duffy wanted to analyze how, in less than three years, proponents of riverboat gambling managed to overcome enormous opposition to the initiative in both the state legislature and in the Iowa populace at large. One major contributing factor, she concluded, was a well-financed and professionally-developed advertising campaign that glorified riverboat gambling's romantic connections with Mark Twain-era scenes.

The public relations strategy directed attention away from gambling and employed "considerable rhetorical artistry" to emphasize instead the scenic aspects of riverboats. The campaign spoke of "family floating theme parks" and consistently used terms such as "golden age" and "recreating Iowa's riverboat history" and the "festive atmosphere" on the boats, should the law pass. The PR blitz emphasized job creation, statewide economic benefits, and the opportunity to create tourist attractions that would showcase Iowa's history and cultural interests (Duffy, 1997).

The initiative's opponents, who emphasized the moral evils of gambling, received far less coverage in the state's media outlets and never did manage to create a consistent rhetorical theme that resonated with voters. In fact, proponents managed to paint them as "parochial, narrow-minded opponents of progress" (Duffy, 1997, p.128).

On April 27, 1989, Iowa's governor signed into law legislation that permitted riverboat gambling on the state's major river fronts. Five other Midwestern states soon followed suit (Anonymous, n.d.) A California-based developer and businessman, Frank Fried, had led the effort to allow riverboat gambling in Iowa. Early on, he and his company established a budget of approximately \$50,000 for the public relations campaign, to be conducted by a six-person team (Duffy, 1997). Fried never profited from his investment, however, since financing for his company collapsed before he could turn his dreams into reality. A local developer instead worked with many of Fried's contacts to establish the first successful riverboat enterprise in Iowa, beginning those operations in April 1991 (Sturgeon, 2011).

Whatever economic benefit Iowa has actually received from riverboat gambling, indirect communication played a significant role in its legalization there. Through the artistic creation and dissemination of many positive, compelling images—none of which focused on

gambling, but instead painted a once-and-future vision laden with nostalgic and upbeat “fantasy themes”—an entire state that for decades had repudiated even a whiff of gambling, ended up championing its propagation throughout the Midwest.

A Potent Tool in Particular Circumstances

Of what use is indirect communication in business? Imagine an individual who suffers under the illusion that he understands something, simply because he knows many facts about it. But those facts cannot have a beneficial effect on his life so long as the illusion remains.

Direct communication has little chance of removing the illusion, since the individual’s problem is not a lack of facts, but a misapprehension of them. The unique power of indirect communication is that it seeks to do an end-run around the illusion in order to remove it, so that the individual can apprehend the facts without the obscuring effects of the illusion. Indirect communication, then, can serve business well when either of two conditions prevail:

1. The audience requires, not more information, but an alternative understanding of the information it already has.
2. The audience has an emotional resistance to a message that keeps it from acting in optimal ways.

While an indirect strategy does not give anyone a communication panacea for all business circumstances and contexts, it does provide business people with a potent tool when they find themselves, let’s say, in a room that suddenly goes dark.

Anyone for dunking?

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