

# **C Students Rule!**

## **The 4Cs of Truth in Communication™ -a bullet-proof tool to develop and deliver stand-out effective communication**

By Isabelle Albanese

The ability to communicate clearly and to identify effective communication has never been more important than today in our hectic, fragmented world. And while there are undoubtedly thousands of books written, papers published and philosophies out there about how to communicate effectively, there's a surprisingly simple framework I've developed and perfected over the past ten years – *The 4Cs of Truth in Communications™*.

The 4C's of Truth in Communication™ is a simple model that can be used as a pocket tool for HR managers who have the challenge of drafting messages to a disparate audience – from CEO's to middle managers, supervisors or employees. No matter what the message, applying the 4C's will help identify if it really rocks and why - or where it needs help to keep from sinking like a rock. The method is immediately actionable – you can use it in your very next communiqué – whether it's delivering a speech, some bad news, change in policy or announcing the latest management hire. The 4Cs puts everyone on the same page.

**Comprehension. Connection. Credibility. Contagiousness.** While the Cs might seem like a no-brainer - rational, methodical and left-brained - it's nothing I care to apologize for. It is in the combination of the Cs through which clarity emerges. It is when a message has been put through the model that a clear understanding of what is working and what needs to be fixed is revealed. The 4Cs model asks a series of questions about how the intended audience might respond to your message. In the answers lies the direction you need to move forward.

### **Comprehension: Get it? Got it? Good!**

What is the *single* message and is it being clearly communicated? Simply, put – will the audience *get* it? The Comprehension “C” is fundamental to basic communication. On the surface, this is a simple assessment of whether or not the intended message is being understood. Simple in theory, but not always easy to achieve, because sometimes we are determined to make our audience work exceedingly hard just to *get* the message. How many times have you received a letter, e-mail, or document that after reading and re-reading with some degree of frustration, think to yourself “what the heck are they trying to say to me?!” And this sort of built-in evasiveness starts at the very highest level of the communication world – advertisers! From my early days as an assistant account executive working at Ted Bates Advertising in New York, I have constantly wondered why marketers and advertisers want consumers to work so darned

hard to figure out the basic message. And what makes them think any of us have the time or inclination to do so? After talking to something like 3,500 consumers over the past nine years, I can say unequivocally, that people just really don't have the time or interest to sit there and figure out what it is you're *trying* to say to them! No matter what the level, everyone is very busy. Just ask them and they'll tell you!

In a round of interviews conducted with C-Level professionals (and these are people who are supposed to be a little higher up on the evolutionary scale of message comprehension) for a holding company conglomerate, the "comprehension "C" for a magazine ad was dismally elusive. They repeatedly said, "I'm just not going to spend that much time figuring out what they're trying to say to me. I'm already turning the page." We are *all* busy. There's a lot going on in our daily lives – both business and personal. In my business I hear that constantly, no matter who I talk to –when it comes to understanding basic communication, it's "*please don't make me work that hard. I am very busy.*" Busy, busy, busy. Generally, your audience is perfectly willing to listen to your message. In fact, many *need* to hear it. They just don't want to work hard to GET IT.

**Connection: Yeah Baby!**

Does the message resonate with your audience? Is it persuasive? Does it "click" with them? Does it communicate that you are in sync with them and their needs simply by the way you have positioned your message? These are all critical questions in determining the extent to which any form of communication connects with its audience. Connection is often an emotional response – something that is felt, but can't be explained. That moment when it becomes impossible to ignore that the message has made a visceral connection with the audience. It's that "yes!" feeling. That genuine rapport has been established. Sort of like, "my message, my friend". So, for instance, it's no longer HR managers talking to supervisors trying to *inform* them about a compliance issue; it's a message from someone who really knows their supervisors and *understands what matters to them*. So much so, that they feel the message is speaking directly to them on a personal level. "My message, my friend. Yes!"

*Connecting* with your audience means you have begun to establish a relationship with them via your communication. It means something you said or showed to them has resonated with them on some internal level, whether that's in a rational or irrational way. It has tapped into an existing truth relative to the subject – and it usually ladders deep downward to something emotional – or at the very least, something which is not entirely rational: frustration, excitement, anger, passion, joy, happiness, sadness, resignation, etc.

I was working on communications evaluation for a new Suave hair care campaign – at the time, a completely new message based on a new positioning and tapping into a newly discovered consumer truth. Four print ads depict "mom" (the target) in various family life situations from making a PBJ sandwich to potty-training to playing dress-up. All real-life situations to be sure. "Of course", you might say. If you hold a mirror up to someone they are likely to say "I can see myself!" That doesn't necessarily mean they like what they see, are moved emotionally or otherwise motivated by that image. Agreed. But in this case, it did mean that. One mom looked at those four ads and said,

pointing to each one, “that’s me, that’s me, that’s me and that’s me!” And the connection wasn’t made simply because she could see herself in those situations, it was made because she saw that each of the moms (“me, me, me, me”) *had great looking hair*. And internalized the message that even though I’m a mom and have a crazy, chaotic mom life, using Suave can help me look good! And the beautiful epilogue to this story is that in subsequent testing, these ads met all quantitative communication hurdles. And the Suave hair care brand went on to experience share and sales growth. As consumer insight consultant, a seeker of consumer truth and fellow mom, I’ll just say, “yeah, baby!”

**Credibility: Not a Trace of doubt in my Mind**

Does it make sense for the message creator to speak to their audience in a certain way? Is the tone and manner consistent with the author's position in the "brainspace" of its audience based on their experience with and understanding of their equities and past performance? If the message isn't credible, if it doesn't conform to the subject matter's (or cause's or platform's) existing "truth" in the minds of the audience, it's meaningless. The audience needs to believe *who* is delivering the message, *what* it is that's being communicated and *how* (tone, manner, strength of cause). Otherwise any connection previously established immediately begins to break down.

**WHO:** Does it make sense for you to speak to your audience in this way? Does it logically fit for them – given the equity you have developed among your core target?

**WHAT:** Is it something your audience expects to hear from you? This could be good and bad. If it's something too expected, it could get glossed over or even ignored outright. It may fit, but if it's just “same-old”, there better be enough going on in the areas of Communication and Connection (and Contagiousness) to make up for too smooth a fit. On the other hand, if it is an unexpected message coming from you, there needs to be care taken in crafting the introduction to set the stage.

**HOW:** An unexpected message or mode of delivery can bring a lot of energy and attention to the subject matter (or even to you), especially if its history or your personal equity gives the message permission to "speak" in this way. Even if it doesn't, it can still be powerful if conditions and audience attitudes make it acceptable.

The point is, credibility leads to believability and believability leads to persuasion and persuasion leads to behavior. So even if it's not *instantly* credible – it becomes credible because your audience can see a way to make the message fit. That counts too.

The credibility “C” is all about the author's "truth" and that of the message. It's either going to work for your audience or it isn't, because of the associations made – many of which you have no control over. For a message to be really driving the Credibility train means it gets an immediate head-nod. No question about it. Not a trace of doubt in my mind. Message credibility removes a potential obstacle to comprehension, connection and contagiousness. In fact, when it's credible, the audience doesn't even think about it. Think about it yourself. When you receive a message from someone whom you believe is credible in delivering it, you're not questioning the veracity of the message. You just keep reading and taking it all in.

**Contagiousness: *This is just sick!***

- Is there a sense of energy around the message and the way it is delivered?
- Does it offer a new or different way to view or think about the topic?
- Is it differentiating? In the endless realm of message exposure, is there potential to cut through?
- Is it innately memorable?
- Does it evoke a vivid emotional response?
- Might it have talk potential? (may not always be positive talk)
- Does it motivate the target to *do something*, think something, wonder about something, get more information, etc.

You know how it is when you're in a meeting making a presentation and you've touched on just the right point - the room starts buzzing, your colleagues start discussing what they've just seen/heard—that's when you know the communication is on its way to effectiveness. I've found that Contagiousness in the positive sense, is often intimately threaded to Connection. When a message resonates with its audience in a profound, sink to the bones way, there tends to be a residual Contagiousness effect. They simply can't help thinking about it or mentioning it in conversation. Remember my Suave example – “that's me, that's me, that's me!” For that moment, that woman got excited about the message. She spoke out, her voice rose, she pointed to each ad – she was *infected*. The brand had found an idea that not only resonated with its target – Moms want pretty hair too! – but executed it in a way that left her feeling empowered and excited by it. The Suave brand now has the opportunity to “infect” the way their consumer thinks about the brand. That's contagiousness. It can be tricky, but in many cases, it can be all that truly matters.

Now you might be left with some questions about the model – what if a message does well in a couple of Cs, but not in all? Are all Cs equal? Does the model work equally well across all forms of communication? I developed the 4Cs method to help clients strengthen their internal and external communications. The simplicity of this approach takes the mystery out of understanding what makes communication effective. Using the 4Cs framework can help you develop stronger communiqués and lead to stronger business results.

Isabelle Albanese is the author of the book, **The 4Cs of Truth in Communications™** and has written articles on effective communication which have appeared in publications and on web-sites including Sales & Marketing Management, American Management Association, About.com, Communications Solutions, HR.com, JPMorgan.com, – to name a few. To contact her, visit [www.consumertruth.com](http://www.consumertruth.com). To get the book, visit [www.paramountbooks.com](http://www.paramountbooks.com), [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) or your favorite online bookseller.