

WINNING OVER SENIOR MANAGERS: IMPROVE YOUR MARKETING BY IMPROVING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the results of a survey of senior managers that showed they respond positively to speakers who are sensitive to eight key time and information principles. This paper also describes how to apply these principles to make your presentations more persuasive to senior managers. Finally, several practical and advanced techniques for improving the focus and impact of your presentations to senior managers are described with examples.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing Value Engineering (VE) would be an easy process if you were marketing to other VE consultants. However, because you are often marketing to the un-initiated, particularly to senior managers, presenting VE can be a daunting effort. Fortunately, you can improve your sales presentations by applying a few principles and techniques that smooth the marketing process, especially when senior managers are involved. I will present principles that we collected from senior managers (vice presidents and general managers) at six Fortune 50 companies. I will end the paper with techniques for correcting the typical mistakes made by VE consultants in terms of communications.

PRINCIPLES

Senior managers become difficult audiences only when you violate their principles of time and information management. Let's examine time management principles of senior managers first.

TIME MANAGEMENT

To win over senior managers, you need to know, respect, and act upon their underlying principles of time management. When you customize your presentation, both in content and style, to their needs, you can expect a positive response immediately.

Principle 1: Timelines have shrunk and change is urgent.

This principle means that senior managers face much tougher deadlines for projects and dread the advances of their competition much more than before. To stay ahead, these managers live with a strong sense of urgency. Consequently, they expect subordinates and consultants to respect their lack of time. They expect others to speak concisely, start with the bottom line, and reduce complexity. Reducing complexity would be a nice, logical fit with the fundamentals of VE. The challenge to VE presenters is to "walk the talk," meaning to speak as simply and concisely as would be expected when representing a simplified and intelligent process.

The strong sense of urgency, even in government organizations, often has a detrimental effect on listening skills of senior management. Pressing deadlines, unfinished business, and other worries lead to a distracted and preoccupied audience. For VE consultants to be heard under these conditions, you must be concise and to-the-point.

Principle 2: There is no time for "nice-to's" (secondary level goals or projects)

Senior managers resent having to listen to presentations about activities that are not related directly to primary objectives of their organizations. They expect VE consultants to show clearly and simply how VE would affect their businesses. This means that if you add on secondary benefits or services that you offer which fall into the "nice to have" but "not necessary" category, then you are dramatically weakening your argument for VE with your potential clients. Look at the comparison between crucial and "nice to have" in the table below:

CLIENT'S GOALS	CRUCIAL TO GOAL	NICE TO HAVE
Be premier supplier	VE reduces cost to client, allowing client to reduce costs and selling price.	VE eliminates bottlenecks in manufacturing processes.
Complete projects on budget	VE processes identify unnecessary costs.	VE processes identify non-value-adding steps.

If you have a tendency to digress into anecdotes, story-telling, or side issues, you might want to practice harnessing the desire to digress in favor of winning over senior managers who respect necessary, bottom-line, business-like communications. If you have difficulty talking only about strategic and absolutely necessary information, then bring a partner with you on sales presentations. The partner can either share the presentation with you or signal you when you need to focus more. A good use of sharing is to split the presentation into portions according to each partner's strengths. For example, one presenter could focus on theory and techniques while the other partner observes the potential client and presents his or her strength, such as negotiation of a contract.

Before each presentation, design a nonverbal signal that your partner can send you when you begin to digress into storytelling or side-issues. For example, when your partner touches his or her chin several times, you know that you are digressing and need to re-focus your speaking.

Principle 3: Do your homework.

Standard literature about selling frequently focuses on the use of "open-ended questions" such as "Can you tell me more about your business?" While widely accepted by many potential clients, this type of approach with senior managers is likely to be met by stony silence. Senior managers expect you to "do your homework." This means that you should have an advanced working knowledge of the the potential client's business, his or her particular issues, and the consequences of change in that organization. While many VE consultants will express confidence in knowing generally about a potential client's business, they rarely seek specific knowledge before agreeing to a sales presentation. Even if you are a confident presenter, do the homework of interviewing subordinates and collecting information about a particular potential client.

Doing your homework produces both primary and secondary gains for you. The primary gains take the form of a confident, clear understanding of that client, which will excite the senior managers from that company and possibly differentiate you from the herd of other consultants stampeding the client's doors. Secondary gains are in the form of building relationships. Ironically, as you seek information about a company from its citizens, you will find that the opportunity to "teach" you about themselves leads to a certain intimacy between you and the potential client's organization. You please them by asking about their business and flatter them by giving them a chance to share with you. Their intimacy with you can make you stand out from other consultants who breezily issue their standard presentations without doing their homework and without customizing their presentations to focus on that customer. Intimacy and relationships between consultants and clients lead to sales. So, do your homework by interviewing your contacts at the company or organization, look them up in reputable business journals or in on-line services, and investigate related businesses, competitors, and customers.

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Principle 1: Show me how to do more with less.

Because downsizing and re-engineering are so common, VE consultants should talk about how to do more with less. VE can be the ideal vehicle for making the organization as capable as it was when more heavily staffed. The mistake the VE specialist can make is to ignore this principle and focus on the standard speech of features and benefits of VE. To show senior management that the VE specialist understands them, the specialist should find out how much is not being done and how VE can "get things done."

Principle 2: Show me that you understand business.

To score with senior managers, VE consultants need to show that they know more than VE. VE consultants who can talk about finance, product marketing and management, information management, and manufacturing will make a much more favorable impression than those who talk only about VE. I recommend that savvy VE consultants read *Business Week*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, and other reputable business papers, trade magazines, newsletters and on-line services. Not surprisingly, as VE consultants study business publications in general, they will find valuable information about prospective clients' industries, the clients themselves, and the client's competitors and customers. On-line services make the search for business knowledge even easier because they contain search services that allow users to look for company names and specific articles, without having to read an entire magazine or newspaper. Look for clients web sites as well.

Principle 3: Make it simple.

Senior managers report feeling suspicious and annoyed by overly complicated or self-important explanations of consulting methodologies such as VE. To justify the cost and time commitments required by the VE process, too many consultants speak at length and expound on the complexity and intricacy of the multi-phased VE process. Presenting a large amount of detail throughout a presentation will lead not to a vote of confidence but to concern that VE will complicate already complex problems.

Simplifying information should also extend to your overhead transparencies or slides. The most memorable overheads or slides are the simplest. Some tips to improve your visuals are:

Choose no more than three important statistics per visual. Either eliminate the rest or highlight key numbers.

To highlight key numbers, print them larger, bolder, or in a box or bright color so that they stand out in relation to the other numbers. When speaking about these numbers, repeat them at a minimum of six times.

Clarify trends and predictions by eliminating secondary data from graphs and by drawing thick, clean lines in graphs. Label x and y axes using plain English.

If you are having trouble explaining a visual, then take that difficulty as a sign that the visual is too complicated. If you are struggling with it, so is your audience. Struggling audiences become alienated. Do you want to take that risk?

Make only one point per visual. Tempting though it may be to show detail, the profusion of points on a single visual will again confuse the audience.

Instead of titles for visuals, write a "headline" as you would see in a newspaper. This clarifies the main point and keeps you and your audience focused. For example, instead of the title "Frequency of Parts Replacement," write the title as the headline "Part Replacement Decreases with VE."

For word overheads and slides, use action words such as verbs and eliminate most small words such as "a" and "but." Many VE consultants rely excessively on nouns such as "importance" and "opportunities" and other abstract words, all of which sound impressive but are usually forgettable. Turn nouns into verbs, simplify your phrases, and in these ways you will "walk the talk" of VE. For example, rather than saying "Certain processes are unnecessary according to customers' standards," the VE consultant can say "Customers will not pay for unloading, moving, and mixing products." The result is a vivid and memorable image.

Whenever possible, change phrases into graphic representations. Besides making the information dramatically more memorable, graphics demonstrate

your creativity and ability to make a clear point. Use symbols that relate to your client's business.

Ask yourself this tough question: Do I understand VE well enough that I can talk about it very simply and directly? It is a challenge to describe a complicated process in a simple way. Practice describing VE to non-specialists and even children. Practice starting with simple, general information and moving to more specific information. You can always add detail after you build a foundation of good understanding.

Principle 4: Make your points obvious.

A problem of working with a specific expertise such as VE leads consultants to miss a very important point--to say "the point" of the discussion out loud and not resort to implications and inference-drawing. Although your conclusions may be obvious to you, these conclusions, such as that VE has value, are not necessarily apparent to non-specialists. Say your points out loud. Introduce them as your points, by saying phrases such as "The point is...." Being coy, shy, or indirect often results in no closure with senior managers. They have neither the time nor the inclination to decipher your subtle innuendos or to wade through data, examples, and stories for the "truth" of what you are saying. I advise you not to just get to the point, but to say it, no matter how obvious it seems to you.

Principle 5: Provide specific analyses and recommendations.

VE consultants often tell me that "the facts speak for themselves." Unfortunately, senior managers with limited time want you to tell them what the facts mean. Despite your concern about insulting their intelligence, it is more important to them that you provide the interpretation for the facts, which may also include recommendations. Do not let their high positions in organizations prevent you from telling them what to think and what to do about using VE.

Finally, senior managers want evidence from VE consultants that you have considered the implications or consequences of VE before presenting to them. How can you let them know that you have considered such issues? By talking about it. Discuss the consequences of VE from as many perspectives as you can. Make sure that all of the consequences are

not self-serving. Doing a good job of anticipating consequences for the potential client shows that you are genuinely trying to be a strong business partner with them rather than a simple "seller" of services. If your goal is also a long term relationship with a potential client, then partnering is a better route than simple selling.

Talking about VE with senior managers can be made easy by recognizing their needs and meeting them. If you let the principles above guide your actions on a consistent basis, you can create a valuable long term relationship with senior management. To improve the way you communicate with senior managers, you must fight the urge to impress and complicate. Paradoxically, your ability to talk about VE simply and clearly will be the most persuasive speaking of all to senior managers.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE YOUR SPEECH CLARITY AND CONCISENESS

Get your speech under control. This means to get to the point, be clear, stay focused, and be very responsive to your listeners. Avoid rambling. Rambling speech is characterized by overly long sentences, use of vague referents such as "he," "it," and "that," lack of apparent structure, and often repetitive, continuous talking.

Test your communication skills in the quiz below:

Quiz

- Do you take a long time to get to the point?
- Do your listeners act confused or impatient?
- Do your listeners hesitate to respond and ask you what you want from them?
- Do people make excuses for "cutting you off?"
- Do you tense up when it is your turn to talk, even at social events with familiar people?
- Do you often lose your train of thought?

If you answered "yes" to at least half of these questions, then you are probably not as concise and clear as you can be.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Use a strategy to organize your speech.

Rambling is the result of a lack of strategizing. Speakers often don't realize that communication is not free association. There are conscious and unconscious thinking patterns. If you a rambler, try using a few strategies.

Use the small steps of thought organization described below as a way of increasing interest, your sense of control, authority, and completeness of expression.

1. SUBJECT - EXPLAIN - GIVE AN EXAMPLE

This means: State the subject, explain the subject, then give a clear, relevant example.

Example:

The subject that I am going to address is using the VE process to cut costs. Let me explain. Cost cutting using the quality process was done by examining fixed costs and then variable costs. For example, our fixed costs were the building and lab equipment.

2. POINT - PROOF - POINT

This means: Make your point upfront, then prove it, then restate the (same) point.

Example:

The point is that we need to cut costs in our department. One reason why we have to cut costs is that our costs are exceeding our budget this year. Another reason why we have to cut costs is that the economy is unstable. So, the point is that we have to cut costs right away.

CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

This means: Put your ideas in the order in which they occurred over time.

Example:

First we identified departmental costs as an area that would benefit from quality teamwork. Next, we asked six individuals if they would like to be part of the process. Two weeks after we lined up our six

team members, we met for two hours and identified two cost areas for improvement.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

This means: Organize your information so that you compare and contrast times, costs, value, acceptance, or other factors, variables, or properties.

Example:

Compared to our previous system of examining costs, the quality process was much better. In the previous system, we met with an agenda that had various items on it. In contrast, the quality process meetings allowed us to focus on just one agenda item: costs.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

This means: State the cause and its consequences; similar to a Problem-Solution approach

Example of C + E:

Use of the quality process resulted in three main improvements. Because we had so many fixed costs, we targeted that area first. As a result of our analysis, we were able to cut costs by 10%, and we think that further quality process work will yield even better results.

Did you notice the words and phrases that were underlined? The underlined "structuring words" are very important for speakers and their listeners. I recommend that you actually say all of those types of words out loud. Why? Because hearing them organizes information for both the speaker and the listeners. For the speakers, structuring words keeps you focused on a topic until it is complete. For listeners, structuring words provide "signposts" or markers of the direction that you are taking. So remember, use not just the strategies but the "structuring words" as well.

Observe Body Language

Below are several "metrics" or ways of measuring or observing that your conversations and presentations are clearer:

- Listeners respond warmly and attentively throughout the conversation or presentation: their eyebrows are raised, their eyes are rounded, and they lean forward while you are talking

- Listeners give you more eye contact
- Listeners follow your directions more accurately
- Listeners ask you fewer questions for clarification
- Your listeners appear more relaxed: smiling, shoulders down, hands relaxed

Read nonverbal signals that others are confused.
Confused listeners often:

- o avoid eye contact
- o tilt their heads
- o squint their eyes
- o close their mouths
- o lower their eyebrows
- o cross their arms and legs
- o turn away from you

Avoid vague words

Another way to speak clearly is to avoid unclear words including it, that, this, those, they, he, she, we, and them. *Unfortunately, speakers often use these words while feeling assured that their listeners know what they are talking about. They talk as if they and their listeners are looking at the same picture.* The solution is easy. For at least a few weeks, speakers should avoid the words above in their speech. For example:

NOT: It would be great for them. Using the process will make a difference.

INSTEAD: The VE process will reduce your costs by at least 12%. If you begin to do function analysis during the conceptual design phase, you will see how many pumps could be eliminated.

Expressions can also be vague: other areas of interest, some things, none of the above.

Stop repeating yourself

Speakers who note when others do not understand them usually repeat themselves time after time, hoping to "get through" to their listeners. This technique seems logical, but the large volume of speaking compromises success. This "recycling" of information and comments has got to go. One way to reduce speech recycling is to change your thinking about speaking. More is not better. Instead, program yourself to realize that you need to say only

a few sentences in a conversation before giving your conversational partner a turn.

Say one thought in each sentence

The desire to "say it all" plagues many speakers. If you recognize yourself as a "say-it-all" type, then you probably speak in very long, overloaded sentences. Research shows that the average adult listener can hold only 16 words in short term memory, so you should not be surprised when your listeners do not remember your 30 word sentences. Try this: say only one idea per sentence, then end the sentence and start a new one. In fact, rather than just starting a new sentence immediately, insert a pause between sentences so that you can think, edit, and observe the reactions of your conversational partners.

Start in the right place and stay on track.

Speakers often start too far ahead of either what their listeners' remember about the subject or how much their listeners know. Many speakers just "jump right into" their topics. Speakers need to remember to provide brief introductions to their topics to warm up and orient their listeners.

Speakers should always start each conversation with a few sentences to review previous conversations and to remind their listeners of information that they will need to understand the rest of the conversation or presentation.

Tips and Techniques

Finally, here are a few quick ideas to eliminate rambling.

- Finish each idea before proceeding
- Tolerate silence.
- Shorten your sentences.
- Picture your idea in your mind, as if on "video," before speaking.
- Picture your words on a screen in your mind before you say them.
- Put the most important information in your sentences at the beginning or end of each sentence.
- Slow down by as much as 70% to allow more time to think.

When you present to senior managers, you can increase both your success and your confidence by understanding the principles that they respect and by

being an efficient speaker. Senior managers want to learn about what you have to say, and if you communicate well with them, they can be enormously supportive.