

Reaching the right audience: You've got to get to know them.

By Ashley Pinder

Imagine that you were asked to give a speech. Your first question would most likely be about the expected audience for your presentation. If you don't know who you're talking to, it's hard to tailor a good and effective message that resonates with the intended recipients. The same can be said for all forms of communication. In fact, knowing your audience and giving them what they want is not only the most important aspect of giving a speech, but also of creating a long-term strategic communications plan and communicating on a day-to-day basis.

As a note, although it isn't always as easy as having an assembled audience in an auditorium for a speech as a target, we will refer to our expected audiences as a "group."

Get to Know Them

As you embark on a plan for a communications strategy or a one-time project you must first identify your audience. There is no official substitute for formal survey research, but when you find yourself with very little time and very little budget, there are many ways to go about uncovering the information you need without breaking the bank.

Many times you may think you have an idea of who your audience is. However, it is imperative that you do some form of research to find out if your hunch is correct. You may find yourself thinking that you want to reach everyone. But, it is not always best to spread your message thin in hopes of reaching a broad base. In fact, if you can effectively reach your most important target, you will yield greater results than just dispersing a watered down mass information campaign. Think "targeted" communications.

At Curley & Pynn we employ various informal methods to get to know our audiences. We've successfully utilized the following actions in a recent communications project including: primary and secondary research, researching the audience's involvement in organizations in the community and then conducting research on those organizations through direct personal outreach.

Step One: Basic Internet Research

As you've probably guessed, the fastest place to begin learning about your audience and how to reach them is through the Internet. You can conduct inexpensive secondary research by reading past news articles on the group you believe to be your audience, reviewing Web sites that mention this group and assessing the group by collecting anecdotal evidence.

You should determine if there are commonly held beliefs within the group you plan to speak to; has this group taken a stance on a political issue? Have they ever been profiled by a news outlet? What is the basic demographic of this group? It isn't always easy to determine blanket characteristics, but it's the best way to begin. It can be as easy as going to Google News and typing in the event name, group name or region to see if any common themes prevail among the recent coverage. Now you've completed your introductory information search to confirm or deny your initial hunch about the group.

Step Two: Involvement Research

To know your audience, you need to have an idea where they get their information and who they regularly communicate with. That is generally gleaned from identifying the audience's involvement in the community or in the industry in which they work.

From a local perspective, you should look in your audience's backyard. Find out what organizations they are involved in or support. Find out where their kids go to school and what activities they attend. Do they go to church? If so, what local nonprofits does that church get involved with? By getting to know where the group is involved, you can identify what its members place as important and how best to get messages in front of them. Although these associations seem simple, they may not appear on the resume or "about page" of each group you want to reach. You have to dig to find out – and this is something else that can be done through simple online research.

In addition, knowing the organizations your audience is affiliated with gives you access to some social and demographical data. If you find your audience is made up of people active in the local chapter of the Rotary, you may be able to immediately know some characteristics about them, such as they enjoy formality in meetings, serving the community and fellowship.

Also, if you identify the organizational involvement of your audience you may find that an organization they are involved in supports a primary charity; then find out what that charity's annual event is, and get involved in it. Every organization has a list of needs, whether it is fully funded or struggling, and addressing the needs of an organization important to your audience will place your message prominently in front of your intended recipient. Sometimes all it takes is a phone call.

It may be surprising in this Internet age, but at Curley & Pynn we sometimes actually just pick up the phone to get the information we want. For one particular client project we called various local organizations to find out the kinds of things they are hoping to get from charitable contributions and what they really needed from the community. In fact, the phrase "what is your wish list" was effectively used to generate the ideal situation for an organization, i.e., we identified how our client could align with the needs of their audience. Sometimes the answer was easier than we expected. All of this information helps to get to know our audience and then reach them.

Having no experience in a sector has never deterred Curley & Pynn from taking on a project head-on. In the case with a restaurant client, we turned to research to find out how to best maximize the company's announcement: after 25 years operating company-owned units it would begin selling multi-unit franchises. This wasn't just about making an announcement, it was about spawning action.

What would generally be thought of as the case for a mass distribution of a press release turned into so much more – by way of audience research. We found that because our client was hoping to sell multi-unit agreements, it became clear that these potential franchisees would be investors with restaurant experience or restaurateurs expecting to find an investor. Therefore, we researched the association of these types of people. Through searching major franchising company Web sites and news stories, reading various news stories about franchising and profiles of current franchisees of comparable restaurant companies, it became clear that many such people were involved in one organization – the International Franchise Association (IFA).

We learned that our client's announcement would be much more than an issued press release – it should be tied into the annual IFA event. Not only did Curley & Pynn suggest that our client join this member organization and make the announcement there, but we developed an entire media announcement plan for engaging investment and trade media. This gave us a chance to speak to a very targeted audience, that we were able to identify through getting to know them.

Reach Them by Creating Something Just for Them

Last summer Curley & Pynn was tapped to provide strategic counsel to a large company bidding for a public contract in order to increase that company's chances by presenting itself as an asset to the local community. The first thing Curley & Pynn did was identify the target audience. In this case, the audience was small ... the county commission that would eventually award the contract. As people with a responsibility to serve their districts, we knew that the financial aspects of the bid would be only one aspect of their review; they would also be interested in the value-added benefits the company could provide to their constituents.

Each commissioner oversaw a district with at least one struggling high school – a school that is generally near and dear to their heart. Therefore, we decided to tailor a program for students in each of the district's lowest socio-economic public school that related to the line of business of our client. We already knew our client was an expert in their industry and could provide on-the-job training programs and funding to professional courses at these very deserving schools. These struggling students needed technical skills to be able to work while attending public school and to secure employment in the area after they graduated. This was music to the ears of the commissioners, and thus a win-win. Not only were we able to utilize the expertise of our client to relate it to the needs of the schools, but we used out-of-the-box thinking to create new community programs that in the end were aimed at reaching the audience – the decision-makers. Not lost on the client was the reality that this outreach would benefit them, as well, by helping to train their future workers.

We found out who we were speaking to, we assessed what would be most important to them and we created a program for them. This is a prime example of reaching the audience by knowing them.

Speak to Them Where They Are

Another aspect of effectively communicating to an audience is identifying who you want to take action. If you have an important business announcement there is generally a goal in mind when making the announcement other than just disseminating information. If there is a particular audience that you want to know your announcement then you need to make sure your message finds them. This means you may have to reach out to unexpected media in a strategic way to get your message to the right people, who are potential business patrons. It is not enough to get the word out about your news, but it needs to get to the right group.

It's About Them: Not You

In the end, when you are speaking at an event, or sharing a message through a communications campaign, your goal is to reach your audience and really connect with them. In order to do that, first you have to know them. By understanding your audience, aligning with their interests, and connecting with them in different ways you have a great chance of getting the results you desire.