



Engineers can—and do—communicate well! Presentation and selling for the technical professional.

By Anne Scarlett, first printed in the *Modern Steel Construction*

For many, effective communication skills do not come naturally. It's no wonder that abundant information has been written on the topic; in fact, it's a multi-billion dollar industry and growing! So why write yet another article on effective communication skills? Because engineers are special, and I personally believe in you all. Not only can these skills be learned, they can even be mastered! Some engineers just need an extra boost to discover their inner communicator.

There are several aspects of good communications, but for now we'll focus on two: presentations and selling. The intent here is not to describe how to present and sell, but rather to offer solid reasons to boost confidence and pique interest in honing your own communication abilities.

Presentations are structured—and developed—using a process. Just as an engineering process is logical and orderly, so too is an effective, well-structured presentation. The steps are similar to what you've always been taught: Choose your theme and core messages, and then build an outline where every element of your content reiterates, supports, or explains your intent. Extraneous information that does not belong will simply dilute your intention, much like including irrelevant information within a drawing set. As you prepare your next presentation, try tackling the content exactly as you would an engineering challenge, using one of the many presentation outline formulas that exist.

Communication is a team sport. Just as when you are working on a multi-disciplined project team, common language must also be attained between the speaker and his "audience." Prior to a presentation, we know that we need to do our research in terms of demographics, buying decisions, existing knowledge on the subject, attitudes/personalities, and the venue itself. And when you are in the moment, selling or presenting, you must be cognizant of the audience every step of the way—gaining attention, establishing common ground, sharing information, checking for understanding, and checking for agreement.

"Strangers are friends you have not yet met." Whether you are giving an informal presentation while sitting across the desk from your prospect, or you're speaking to an audience of 200, these people share something in common with you. They are human, plain and simple, and they are all actually rooting for you to do well. Think about it: When you sit in an audience and watch a speaker struggle, do you squirm uncomfortably and strongly hope that they will eventually pull themselves together to succeed? It's rare for audiences (even skeptical prospects) to want others to fail in their presence. So think of your audience as a group of cheerleaders, rooting you on toward success!

The eureka! factor. Just as how you get excited when you solve a complex engineering challenge, that same "Ah-ha!" occurs when people understand you and how you can solve their business challenges. And that feeling is well worth preparing for! So, yes, while it may be tough and unpleasant to prepare, delivering presentations and sales pitches are actually quite rewarding when you are able to successfully pump everyone up! Be assured, a sincere enthusiasm and delivery style will be welcomed by even the most disinterested of audiences.

Nervous energy is better than no energy! Why not welcome those "nerves" with open arms? Let it be your chance to share stories, teach, inform, persuade, and even entertain/perform. Think about it; you've got the floor, and you've got stuff

to say! Good stuff. It's all a matter of organizing, culling, and delivering it in a way that makes good sense to your audience. There's a fine line between being nervous and being excited, and with the right attitude and personal pep talks, you can transform your nerves into a vibrant, engaging delivery.

Prove it. As an engineer, you often apply formula and logic to reach solutions. As a result, you have backup to support your decisions every step of the way. Similarly, in order to deliver a powerful, highly credible presentation or sales pitch, you must provide backup statements to succinctly support your claims. Why are you the best firm for the job? Why is your expertise different than your competitors'? How did you add value to a particular case study? To keep your proof statements on track, try preparing them using the STAR technique (situation/task, action, and result). Sophisticated human resource professionals often rely upon this format when they are conducting behavioral interviewing with job candidates, but it works well in any situation where you are supporting your claims through stories.

Selling is not an imposition! Your instincts may tell you that if you are selling to a prospect or existing client, then you are pestering them or overstepping your bounds. In fact—provided that you do have something valid and valuable to offer—you would be doing them a disservice not to sell! When you view yourself as a consultant doing consultative-based selling, then it's about helping the clients and making them aware of their options.

Keep your eye on the ball; it's about them, not about you. When you are in a position where you could up-sell an existing client, offer them services that will truly add value. When you worry about their well-being first and foremost, (and not about your firm's bottom line), then you will naturally find yourself in a position to offer additional services that could better support their business.

Wrap it up; elicit action! Never (ever!) close a presentation or a sales pitch without a call to action. Whatever your intentions and message, make sure that the listeners walk away with an action item, even if it's just to contemplate a specific aspect of your content. When possible, try to ensure that you too play a role in that call to action. Perhaps you encourage them to contact you with their thoughts within a specific timeframe. Perhaps you state what action you will be taking, with the understanding that they should expect this action (e.g., receiving more information from you) by a certain date and that you will be following up to hear their thoughts (again, by a certain date). What's key here is to not just create a call to action, but to also establish timeframes—much like when you manage a technical project. Depending upon the scenario, setting timeframes may increase your odds in terms of how many listeners actually take that next step.

Here is my call to action for you: Pick at least three of these nine elements and choose the ones where you feel you have the most room to grow. Write down the steps you will take to develop yourself in those three areas. Find a buddy with whom you can share your progress every two weeks for a total of three months. And finally, if you need consulting assistance to help you in this matter, feel free to contact me or another competent professional to give you guidance and additional motivation. Don't let anyone tell you that engineers are rotten communicators. If you apply the same gusto to developing your communication skills as you did when earning your engineering degree, then you most certainly can be an effective presenter!