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## Delivery Skills for Both the Pulpit and the Podium

By Jim Endicott, Owner/Manager of Distinction

Shaun had really packed 'em in that morning - no small feat for a weekend gig. What could have been a decidedly pragmatic approach to his topic had taken some refreshing turns for the large crowd gathered there that morning. He opened his presentation with a powerfully realistic movie scene displayed through an electronic projector quickly setting the context for what he was about to share. As he moved into his second and third points, he then wove in some personal stories and even the use of a prop or two from a backpacking trip to underscore his concluding point. Time seemed to pass almost too quickly for the audience, which was a real rarity for those in his line of work. If you guessed this was one of those weekend resort sales pitches or real estate seminars, you'd be wrong. Shaun is actually Pastor Shaun and you can catch his gig... I mean sermon, every Sunday morning in Newberg, Oregon. Scenes like this seem to be played out in greater numbers each week around our country. The use of visual support and attention to how the "story" is told is no longer just a big business thing and today's growing churches are quickly adapting to not only changing demographics, but also adapting to how congregations assimilate spiritual concepts and are moved to consideration or action.



It's no surprise that multimedia has penetrated this marketplace. Those involved in organized religion have been faced with the ever-increasing challenge of how to communicate in ways that are meaningful for this media-savvy generation. The post-modern population of today, as some have labeled them, seems to be characterized by their pronounced lack of personal engagement with more traditional communication approaches. Yet, despite this difficult reality, some churches still seem to be flourishing. This fact seems to be born out in a Gallup study in 1999 that indicated that in interviews with thousands of respondents, those indicating regular church or synagogue attendance in 1999 rose to 43% from 37% just three years earlier. There are clearly many socio-economic influences at play in such statistics, but the changing art of congregation communication is playing no small role.

The attractiveness of this church target market has not been lost on the major electronic projector manufacturers and systems integrators either. They've long been aware that church attendance increases during difficult economic times and opportunities for technology enhancements are numerous. Unfortunately, as more and more churches integrate the newer communication technologies, they soon discover that technology by itself, may not be the answer. Badly designed visual content or personal communication styles that get in the way of an effectively communicated thought, still seem to make it difficult for many attendees to remember important points long after they leave the parking lot.

Whether business or organized religion, a three-fold gap generally exists between content, technology and style. Although some seem to effectively leverage all, most “presenters” struggle with one, two or maybe all of them. This was underscored recently for me as I addressed a group of 45 Masters of Business Administration (MBA) students at a local university. After finishing the first 90-minute segment on personal communication imperatives for business, one student came up to me during the break and quickly introduced himself. Although he was pursuing his own MBA degree, his father was one of the three leaders of a prominent North American church denomination. “The church needs to hear what you told us this evening”. I knew that to be true as well because church leaders in increasing numbers have been popping up in my public seminars as they seem to be hungry for ideas on how to break through to their congregations. The unique skills that leverage technology and personal communication style are rarely taught in religious training grounds, however, and those given spiritual responsibility for a group of people are often forced to seek out outside resources to better tune their skills. Here are some of the ideas that I shared with those adult MBA students and why I believe it’s so important for the religious organizations of today:

### **Before you lead someone anywhere, you must first come along side them**

In this day and age, audiences of all types find themselves much more responsive when they believe that the person communicating the message understands them and their issues. The days of authoritative communication without an underpinning of vulnerability and personal relationship are numbered. A 1999 New York Times/CBS Poll revealed the increasingly skeptical nature of our audiences when 63% of them indicated that, “in dealing with most people, you can’t be too careful.” The same group indicated that, “of the people they knew well, 85% of them would expect them to be honest and fair.” The moral of this story is that when an audience believes they know us, their trust goes up by a factor of three and there is no greater way for a group to know us than through the self-disclosure of personal story. When an audience believes they know us and we demonstrate an insight into their fears, uncertainties and pain, then they are much more inclined to follow. Facts, data and words alone rarely reach into the human heart in any setting.

### **Relational presenters build bridges where traditional presenters just deliver facts**

Whether the pulpit or podium is your venue, there are some facts related to interpersonal communication that are more relevant today than ever before. Traditional communication styles are finding it increasingly challenging in this day and age to change and influence people’s lives.

- Traditional presenters stay in their own world and set of experiences while relational presenters go into their audience’s world and demonstrate an understanding of them and their issues.
- Traditional presenters ignore what’s going on in their presentation environments. It can be 100 degrees in the room, their time could be cut in half and someone could have died in the front row and the traditional presenter will deliver the message in complete indifference to their audiences. The “giving” of a clear presentation becomes more important than their audiences actually “getting” it. Relational presenters acknowledge and adapt to room dynamics and show great respect for their audience’s time and attention.
- Traditional presenters find great comfort in anchoring themselves behind a podium. The distance from their audiences and elevated stature can help them feel more

authoritative. The relational presenter orchestrates distance with intent. Stepping down on occasion from a platform and closing the distance with his audience not only closes the physical gap but also the relational gap as key points and poignant stories are now communicated with more personal impact.

- Traditional presenters have a difficult time getting too far away from their notes. Although they try to cast an occasional glance towards their audiences, it's clear that without their carefully scripted notes, there is no presentation. The relational presenter's eyes are constantly making contact with their audiences as they visually assess impact and approach. The eye contact becomes another important validation of the relational connection that's actively desired with their audiences.
- The traditional presenter finds that additional visual support is relatively unimportant compared with their personal speaking abilities. If visuals are used, they're primarily text-based information on screen. The relational presenter understands how today's audiences are moved to consider and retain information through the use of their senses; story, video, drama, music, props, testimonials and other sensory-based, right-brain communication approaches.

Although church growth statistics vary greatly by location and denomination, it's clear that some groups are experiencing consistent growth while others, static growth or decline for years. I suppose I run some risk in putting religious organizations in something other than an intensely spiritual context but one thing is for sure, people are the same no matter whose message they may be listening to. As leaders of religious congregations struggle to make their messages better understood, the need to embrace the way God created our brains to process thoughts and ideas will be far more effective than clinging desperately to approaches that are less and less relevant to those they serve.

Amen.

*Learn more about [Jim Endicott and Distinction](#) in our Contributor's section.*

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