Communication through a lens

“The great aim of education is not knowledge but action” – Herbert Spencer

Introduction

Communication is the art of sending messages. Since coming to Alma College almost four years ago I have developed a communication perspective. As a result, I now have a new way of looking at life, and a more developed understanding of how communication works. To describe my personal communication perspective, the best metaphor would be a lens that helps me see things differently than others.

We all have different ways in which we view the world around us. We all evaluate decisions differently, and respond as we feel appropriate. For me, my communication perspective is like a special lens that I see the world through, and it makes me more educated towards how messages are being sent and received.

Communication to me is the art of sending messages. Messages are sent everyday in countless ways. A smile, a frown, a billboard, a wardrobe- these are all ways in which individuals consume messages each day. Not just face to face conversations, but any attempt to send or receive a desired response through a message is communication. Having a communication perspective like a lens allows me to see notice messages individuals send and evaluate for effectiveness in reaching a desired response. Also having this communication perspective like a lens can help me become a more effective communicator.

Throughout this essay I will further explain my communication perspective. I will examine the articulation of my communication perspective and how it relates to specific areas of the
communication field. In addition, I will review the development of my communication perspective and finally the utility of this unique lens.

Articulation:

As mentioned, my communication perspective is like a lens which allows me to see communication differently than others. However, when I think about what my communication perspective is and its intent, I think of strategic communication. A 2005 article from the MIT Sloan Management Review defined strategic communication as, “communication aligned with the company’s overall strategy, to enhance its positioning” (Argenti at el., 83). Although this definition comes from a business management journal and uses the word “company,” it is relevant in defining my communication perspective. I will rephrase this definition in my own words to make it more applicable in defining my communication perspective. Strategic communication to me is: tailoring a message in order to get a desired response to enhance positioning towards the ultimate goal.

Being a Business Administration major and Communication minor, strategic communication is especially interesting to me. I observe strategic communication taking place constantly, whether it be a commercial on television or a child reasoning with his parents to stay out later than curfew. These are all attempts at strategic communication, and especially in the corporate business world, this communication perspective will be beneficial for me. I find this area to be most interesting to me, and an area that I strive to constantly learn more about. This is why my communication perspective is defined as strategic.

The subject of strategic communication can fall under the category of communication in culture. Especially mass strategic communication has a massive effect on certain cultures, and it is the job of good communicators to best get the response desired. For example, in the case of
marketing a product, advertisers to strategically market a product/service in a way that creates a need, and ultimately increases revenues. When looking at this situation, we can see that a message is being sent to get the desired response- that consumers need the product/service, which moves the company closer to the ultimate goal of increasing revenues. As consumers, we are surrounded by this every day, and with my lens I am able to look deeper and analyze the situation to help make me a better strategic communicator in the future. My strategic communication perspective is certainly relatable to this area of communication in culture.

**Development:**

The development of my communication perspective is a continuous process. It is important for me to look back at all of my past experiences not just at Alma College to reflect on what helped me develop an interest in strategic communication. Strategically tailoring messages is a skill that I am striving to perfect.

When I think back as early as possible in my life, I think about how as young children we were beginning to strategically tailor messages to get a desired response. My parents tell me that as a young toddler I would repeatedly bang my head against a wall if I did not get what I wanted. Although I did not realize it, I was becoming a young strategist and using what little skills and knowledge I had to try and convince my parents to give me what I wanted. However, my parents go on to say that eventually I would get tired of banging my head, after I realized my attempt was not going to work. Fortunately, I learned my lesson, and now try talking with my parents instead of banging my head in order to get what I want. Though this is a simple example, it helps make sense of my communication perspective.
As I moved on through life, adding more skills, experience and knowledge along the way, I had many influences that changed the way I communicated. One such influence was the documentary film, *The Persuaders*. I viewed this film my first semester on campus in an introductory Mass Media Communication course, then later the following year in a Risk and Crisis Communication spring term course. The film documents the art of persuasion in mass media today, including various interviews with individuals involved. Two such individuals I found very interesting throughout the film were Frank Luntz and Clotaire Rapaille.

Luntz, a political consultant and strategist, is most famously known for his political work with the Republican Party. In the film *The Persuaders* is noted as successfully reframing the term “Estate Tax” to “Death Tax.” This refers to a controversial issue that went overlooked for a long time until Luntz began using the term “Death Tax.” This tax is placed on the estate of individuals upon death, and became a major issue in Washington; Luntz is responsible for changing the way individuals perceive this specific issue by simply changing one word (Persuaders).

To continue, *The Persuaders* also called to my attention Clotaire Rapaille. Rapaille is a French marketing specialist who studies how consumers think. During the film, he was shown working with focus groups in interesting ways in order to get individuals to think on a very basic and primitive level. He is considered to be a “guru” of market research, and claims that consumers make purchasing decisions on a subconscious level (Persuaders).

Luntz and Rapaille were great influences and opened my eyes to a whole new realm of strategic communication. After seeing the effect Luntz had on consumers by changing one word resulting and changing an entire cultures opinion of a political topic, I became especially interested in the
theory of framing. Since I have done much research on framing, and found many influential pieces of work to help shape my understanding.

Throughout my research I have found many definitions of framing. One of the most complete definitions of framing I have found comes from an article I read during my Seminar in Communication Inquiry course. According to Entman, framing “essentially involves selection and salience.” He goes on to say in his article: *Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm;*

“To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”

(52)

To frame is a process I find especially interesting because it helps a communicator achieve a desired response by shaping a message. In another influential journal article, *Thoughts on Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming,* author David H. Weaver talks about the use of framing in mass media. He explains that, “frames are tied in with culture as a macrosocietal structure” (143). Weaver goes on to talk about research preformed looking at the effects framing has on individuals on a macro level. This article along with the work of Gerald E. Smith helped show how framing can be effective in advertising to a mass number of consumers.

As mentioned the work of Gerald E. Smith has been influential to me when researching the role framing plays in advertising. In his article, *Framing in Advertising and the Moderating Impact of Consumer Education,* Smith references techniques found to be effective in using frames in advertising. He explained that “Negatively framed advertising increases the perceived likelihood of suffering a post- purchase loss because the consumer fails to purchase the correct brand” (50). I
found this point to be especially interesting. Weaver references how framing can shape emotions through advertising by helping create a need for a product or service. This article helped me further understand the role framing plays in advertising.

Throughout my development of my communication lens and research of framing, I found that framing involves presenting information in terms of gains and losses. The article *All Frames Are Not Created Equal: A Typology and Critical Analysis of Framing Effects* tells about the gains and losses relationship in framing. The authors state “framing involves emphasizing either the potential gains or the potential losses of both options to the bargaining parties” (153). This means that when presenting an issue, putting emphasis on either the gains or losses associated with an issue has a significant impact on consumer opinions. Researching the framing theory has given me a further understanding of how framing affects consumers and how frames can be used most effectively.

Another scholarly article that impacted how I thought about the framing theory was *Media Framing of a Civil Liberties Conflict and Its Effect on Tolerance* (Clawson at el.). This work was interesting because the researchers analyzed local news coverage of a Ku Klux Klan rally. One news station framed the rally as a demonstration of free speech and gauged that viewers of the television coverage were more accepting of the rally in their small Ohio town. While another station covered the same rally and framed their reporting to show that the Ku Klux Klan’s presence was an endangerment to the citizens of the town. Viewers of the second news station coverage were significantly less accepting of the rally than those who witnessed the first station’s coverage (Clawson at el.). This to me showed the impact frames can have on even the most controversial topics.
In finishing up the discussion on framing research, there is a vast amount of scholarly research on the topic of framing. There are a few articles worth mentioning that have helped me further my understanding of framing. The first is, *Seven Models of Framing: Implications for Public Relations*, which as the title insists, the article offers insight into different models of framing to be used specifically in regards to public relations and communicating on a mass level (Hallahan). Another article is Stephen D. Reese’s work, *The Framing Project: A Bridging Model for Media Research Revisited*. This article explains that “framing opens up questions that were not on the table before” (149). This previous thought is interesting because frames allow individuals to see situations differently than they may have before, which as he insists leads to new questions (149). Lastly is the work of Chong and Druckman in the article, *A Theory of Framing and Opinion Formation in Competitive Elite Environments*, which discusses how thoughts formulate in reacting towards a frame (Chong and Druckman). All these articles have helped me become more understanding of the theory of framing, which I find especially interesting in regards to my strategic communication perspective.

To continue, when I think about influences that helped shape my communication perspective, I would be remiss not to mention my summer internship during the summer of 2010. During that summer, I was employed as a sales representative for a debt collection agency. My position required me to seek out new clients each day by cold calling throughout the state of Michigan. The desired response I looked for in walking into any business was simply a few moments of time to discuss with a company representative how my company could benefit their company. For me this was trial and error in communicating because as I learned, the life of a salesperson is not always glamorous. After going door to door to various businesses, and receiving an array of responses, I
decided I needed to tailor each message to a specific audience in order to get my point across. There were times that I would get a welcome response and employees of the business, and they would be willing to hear what my message was, while in other cases I was not so fortunate, was asked to leave before even hearing my message because I looked like a salesperson. Although I was only offering information and not intending to sell anything, many individuals immediately resisted my presence upon walking in the door and asking for a moment of their time. Having a communication perspective like a lens I was able to realize that I needed to change my approach to become a better salesperson.

As I continued to cold call throughout Michigan, I began to assess the situation before I entered each business. I used my strategic communication perspective like a lens to analyze the situation and adjust accordingly based on previous knowledge. At a busy dentist office for example, instead of asking for a few moments of their time, I would instead leave my information and try calling at a more convenient time. If I tried to have a discussion about the services my company offered when their office as very busy and employees were likely stressed, my reception would not be so warm.

However, there are other cases where I would need to tailor my approach differently, and attempt to send a different message. Such is the case in walking into a seed distributing and supply company for farms in a small town. In this case, my message would need to be more relaxed and causal, because the employees here may be more willing to have conversations given that business is slow that day. These are just a few ways during my internship that helped create my communication perspective and from which learned I needed to correctly sculpt messages in order to get the desired response.
Though these real world experiences helped shape my communication perspective, I believe where it most developed was through the education I received at Alma College. Various courses not just in the Communication department but also in the Business Administration department helped shape the perspective I have now. Without my educational experiences, I would not have had the ability to create a lens like perspective that allows me to see strategic communication differently than others.

When I reflect back to think of the most influential courses taken, the first that comes to mind is the speech communication course taken during my second year. This course required students to construct speeches that were directed towards an audience of peer Alma College students. Of the three speeches I was able to deliver, the one I most enjoyed was the persuasive style speech. This style of speech allowed me to apply all the previous knowledge I had of strategic communication, and also force me to learn new ways to capture the audience’s attention and get my desired response. Struggling with how to explain the complex topic of saving for retirement, I sought advice from professors and peer to help me make the most efficient attempt at sending my message. This feedback was extremely helpful to me, and I was able to see different perspectives other than my own to help shape my message strategically to best fit my audience. I learned that feedback was very crucial to the success of strategic communication, because although my lens is advanced and keen, it is important to allow others to apply their communication perspective as well. I had to learn that although sometimes I may think I am well informed and educated, when it comes to strategically communicating, I do not have all the answers.

Another class that helped me shape my communication perspective was the capstone business course, Global Strategic Management. This course required senior business students to apply all
that they have learned previously in the Business Administration program by preparing and presenting business reports. This class was critical to creating my communication perspective because I learned that audiences can differ greatly, and constructing and sending precise messages is crucial. In my own experience presenting and watching others, I saw how every step of communicating is critical in how an audience perceives and responds to the message. As mentioned earlier, just looking like a salesperson can send an instant message whether intended or not, and the same applied to this course. Those who prepared and looked professional in this business setting in most cases were perceived as being well prepared and had put more effort forth towards the project. This is not just my own opinion but feedback from the students and professors in the class. A valuable lesson learned was that the total presentation of strategic communication should not be overlooked, especially small details such as a wardrobe choice.

Utility:

My communication perspective allows me to view the world differently than most when it comes to analyzing the construction and delivery of messages. I now have knowledge to analyze situations and make educated observations towards the subject because of my communication perspective lens. The knowledge and skills acquired should help me become more critical and become a better communicator which will help me earn success not only in my professional career, but in my personal life as well. This knowledge has helped me learn that communicating is an art form, and requires detail to ensure the desired response is achieved.

First, when I think about how my communication perspective can help benefit me in my professional career, many specific possibilities come to mind. Whether it helps me better communicate with a supervisor about unrealistic goals set, or telling a fellow employee he/she will
be losing a job, many things come to mind. However to broaden the range of what my communication perspective can do for me in my professional career, it can be summed up by saying; my communication perspective will help me shape messages more efficiently to help get me the response I desire.

The key to success in any profession is effective communication. Employees and employers alike need to be able to send messages effectively, whether verbally, nonverbally, electronically or through any other channel. In order for tasks to be completed in a timely manner, messages must be structured and sent efficiently to get a desired response. In the business world, as supervisors communicate with subordinates, great care must be taken in order to send the appropriate message to the appropriate audience in order to have the task completed effectively. Having the communication perspective I do, and being aware that messages are constructed in a certain way to get a certain response, I feel this is a beneficial skill that can help me succeed professionally.

**Conclusion:**

I have outlined how my communication perspective is like a lens that allows me to see the realm of communication different than others. Along with that it was defined that my communication perspective is strategic, which to me is the process of tailoring a message in order to attempt to get a desired response to enhance positioning towards the ultimate goal.

In detailing the articulation, development, and utility of my communication perspective, it is clear that strategic communication is especially interesting to me and a subject that I plan to continuously study and observe even after my time at Alma College. In addition, the development of this communication perspective has been a lifelong process, and being able to be a communication minor has helped narrow and specify the fact that my perspective is strategic.
communication. Lastly, the utility of my communication perspective is especially important because it makes me a more critical consumer in evaluating strategic communication, in addition to making me a better strategic communicator.
Works Cited


