



# SHUT UP

## and say something

### HOW TO DELIVER A RELEVANT MESSAGE TO ANY AUDIENCE

Many believe the 2008 presidential election is the most important the world will know for a very long time because the stakes were so high. I, for one, will always remember being captivated by the analysts and pundits tripping all over each other as they scrutinized policy and tried to predict behavior of would-be voters. But the one lesson to be learned is not from policy, procedures or where candidates stand on the issues. The lesson is simple. Listeners, like voters want to be inspired and motivated.

Even if people don't completely agree with what you say, if you move them, they will listen and perhaps even follow.

By Karen Friedman

I recall a speech I gave at the International Association of Business Communicators conference in Los Angeles, California. It was held at the Century Plaza, a favorite of the late President Ronald Reagan who coincidentally was being buried on that very day. I had my speech all planned out until I walked into the room and realized there was a great opportunity to share simple lessons taught by the 40th President of the United States. This was an audience of communicators. Reagan, whether you liked him or not, was dubbed "the great communicator." He had the unique ability to answer the "so what?" Instead of talking about the details of healthcare, he talked about why healthcare was important to people. He clearly understood how to use language to his benefit so what he said appeared to benefit others. Like any great communicator, Reagan spoke directly to his audience and rose above the fray, which made him appear very presidential. Once asked, how can an actor be president, he quipped: "How can you be president and not be an actor?"

I am not suggesting you need to take acting lessons or dish out one-liners to impress people when you speak, but I am suggesting it is important to answer the "so what" if you want people to pay attention. If your customers or potential customers can't figure out who you are and how you can help them, that's a problem.

A financial services company was getting ready to launch a new service that they hoped would generate millions in profits. To do this, they needed investors with big wallets, so we were called in to help them prepare for "the most important presentation in the company's history" to be delivered by the CEO, CFO, chief risk officer, director of marketing and the company's analytics expert who described himself as "responsible

**"I KNOW YOU BELIEVE YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU THINK I SAID** but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."  
— Richard Nixon

for development of risk strategies and analytical market segmentation."

Let me be painfully honest. I understand what those individual words mean, but I didn't really understand what he did for people, and if it wasn't clear to me, there's a good chance someone else wouldn't get it either. True, I'm one of those left-brain creative people as opposed to many of my right brain technical oriented associates, but you don't have to be a fiscal whiz to know the difference between exciting and "who cares?"

The mock presentation began with the CEO standing in front of a slide talking about the expertise of everyone on his team. This lasted approximately four long, painful minutes. An energetic and personable man during normal conversation, he flatly and monotonously said he's confident that his company will succeed because they have a lot of experience "recognizing securitization technology, which could change the landscape for non-traditional banks" to which I responded, "so what?"

While he insisted the audiences he addresses would understand what he was talking about, I urged him to think about the "so what" instead of getting stuck in the actual words. So what problem is the company solving? So what makes this different from other banking solutions? So what will the company do to penetrate the market, and how quickly will investors make money? That's what potential shareholders want to know. In much simpler terms, this is a company founded by veteran bankers who fully understand the frustrations of millions of small business owners tired of sitting in traffic, standing in bank lines or waiting for needed loans. Once they answer the "so what" by stating the problem in relevant terms, they are better positioned to influence listeners by explaining how they will solve the banking problems of small businesses and how investors will profit.

In our performance sessions, we often utilize a three-step brainstorming approach dubbed H-A-P. It's short for happy, which is the end result everyone is after.

1. Headline
2. Audience
3. Prove it

## STEP ONE: HEADLINE

Step one is a bit of a commercial. By thinking through headlines the company would love to see in the morning paper, participants can brainstorm a broad range of “so what” statements that set them apart from competitors and promote their services to their target audience. Often, groups first come up with self-promotional headlines such as:

- “We have experience in this space.”
- “Our people are great.”
- “We will act responsibly.”

As a former reporter, I interviewed scores of people who did exactly the same thing. Instead of addressing how their experiences solve problems or what their people can provide that others can't, they wanted us to promote them. The reporter, just like a customer or audience, expects you to say your product is great, but that doesn't mean they believe you, which is why there is a silent little voice inside their head that keeps saying “so what?” or “prove it.”

## Fast Fixes

**In an age of complex communications, simplicity is more important than ever.**

- Go through every slide or every portion of your communication and ask, “so what?” If you haven't answered those two words, fix it or get rid of it.
- Look for opportunities specifically at the end of segments, chapters and summaries to remind people how what you're saying impacts them. Use phrases that answer those “so what” questions such as: “So, what this means is” or “to repeat” or “to remind you” so you are continually tying what you're saying to what they care about.
- Identify the audience's pain points in advance to help you address their so what?
- Role-play with a colleague. If you're talking to a customer, have that colleague pretend they are the customer and urge them to continually annoy you by interrupting and asking “so what?” if you aren't addressing the customer's concerns.
- Don't try to impress. Using simple, down-to-earth words that can help your neighbor better understand why something so complicated is easier than they realized is impressive enough and shows that you know your stuff.
- Ask how. If you answer the “so what” by saying your product or service will improve time management, take it one step further by explaining how that will happen, which encourages you to provide relevant examples to your listener.

Brainstorming headlines you'd love to see in print about your product or service is a great way to address the so what for the listener. For example, if your headline says: “Company X invested \$150,000 in technology upgrades last year,” that may be important to the company, but how did those technology upgrades solve problems? However, if you said: “Technology investment reduces debt and spurs innovation, yielding new customers”, you've answered the so what. The financial services company discussed above provides an example of how this works.

**IF YOUR CUSTOMERS CAN'T FIGURE OUT WHO YOU ARE AND HOW YOU CAN HELP THEM, that's a problem.**

Every headline we brainstormed had to address the “so what.”

**Headline:** Different growth model that focuses on customer need

**Headline:** Wide-open opportunity in small business banking that can save customers time and money

**Headline:** Experienced team – adapts to current challenging market conditions

**Headline:** Running a familiar playbook in a more focused way to simplify the process

**Headline:** Using proven responsible methods to make money

**Headline:** Marketing and credit risk is conservative but effective

**Headline:** Current competitors have too many audiences vs. our focused approach

**Headline:** Can help clients find the silver lining in the current credit situation

Once the headlines were exhausted, we combined the best of them to put together an overarching statement that read:

“This is a terrific opportunity to invest in a company that is uniquely positioned to serve the banking needs of small business in a very challenging market.”

While this may be what the company wanted to put out there, it isn't compelling

or convincing by itself. It must be put into context with supporting evidence facts and examples so the company can address the so what for investors.

## STEP TWO: AUDIENCE

Now it's time for step two, which challenges the group to think through specific concerns and questions the audience of investors would likely ask, such as:

**Audience:** How will you get customers to switch to you?

**Audience:** What is your plan for growth beyond launch?

**Audience:** These numbers seem high? Are your sales predictions unrealistic?

**Audience:** Realistically, how much market share can you achieve?

**Audience:** How can you stop others, especially bigger companies, from copying and taking away business?

**Audience:** Do you have any customers that have signed on?

**Audience:** How will you market and promote this?

**Audience:** What happens if you fail?

**Audience:** What is your biggest challenge or fear?

**Audience:** How important is this to the future success of this company?

**Audience:** How much cash do you have on hand?

**Audience:** What are your current investment plans and what is the typical size of your investment?

By thinking through questions and objections, the group is able to identify what's important to the customer, enabling them to move on to step three, which offers proof to back up what they're saying.

## STEP THREE: PROVE IT

What information do you have to back up what you're saying?

**Prove it:** Recent data shows that 25-30 million small businesses are being neglected, which means there is a huge untapped market.

**Prove it:** We focus exclusively on small businesses, so we understand their very specific needs, how they want to do banking moving forward and we are in a unique position to lead this initiative. The initiative includes ...

**Prove it:** Extensive customer surveys show they are disenfranchised with poor service, high fees, mergers and outsourcing. We provide faster access to money, no per-item transaction fees and an entirely different growth model, allowing customers to manage cash flow, etc.

In our sessions, we also come up with real-life examples that have solved problems and can put real

people into our proof points. For example, in this financial services brainstorming session, one of the

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executives told a story about a customer who was denied a loan after 45 years with the same local bank. He explained how his company was able to quickly and easily secure the loan, which allowed the client to grow his business.

Instead of sounding promotional or conceited, “prove it” examples answer the so what and offer important audiences concrete reasons to believe in what you're saying so they remain (H-A-P) happy.

Some of the biggest mistakes we observe in these situations are the following misperceptions:

- If I know it, everyone must know it.
- If I understand it, everyone must understand it.

Just because your audience is packed with financial types doesn't mean they understand your business or know what you know. It is your job to answer the “so what” and tell them what you want them to know. If you assume everyone understands the problem and they don't, you've lost a huge opportunity to influence them. **CEO**



Reprinted with permission from *Shut Up and Say Something: Business Communication Strategies to Overcome Challenges and Influence Listeners* (Praeger 2010). Karen Friedman is a professional communication coach, speaker and chief improvement officer at Karen Friedman Enterprises.

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