

Using Imagery to Engage and Persuade Listeners

Communication has two main components: **the rational the emotional**. Unfortunately, the rational presented alone—such as in hard data and facts—can be dry. And facts quoted in speeches can make listeners fall asleep. Then what can we do to get the message across better?

When facts are central to a message, the role for the speaker is to interpret the figures for their audience. Leaving the audience to make sense of the information as best they can, especially technical information, allows the audience members to place their individual interpretation on the information. Listeners will always filter the rational message through their own experiences and beliefs. However, by interpreting the data for the audience, you guide them to the key conclusions.

The other key factor is emotion. Emotion provides the motivation for action. Providing facts for consideration is reporting. Motivating people to action is *leadership*, an executive quality. The emotional or motivational impact is often best presented through symbols that arouse and create emotion in the listener. **Persuasive messages must have both facts and emotion, so use strong but familiar words that create pictures in people's minds.**

Listeners' senses are the key to effective communication: sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell and visceral (motion and emotion). **People best remember things that reach their sensory memory. Most people are visually oriented. They prefer to receive messages in pictures. Visual symbols are the most powerful of the sensory communication tools.**

The best way to activate an audience is to select just a couple of sensory-rich details to reinforce the important points in the message. A speaker can paint a single, vivid picture – a small example that illuminates a point. **Skilled leaders often use this technique. They distill social/political programs to their essence and summarize through metaphors. They use highly visual examples – usually a story about how a single person is affected.**

And they use metaphors. A metaphor is a symbol or image applied to an object or action to which it is imaginatively but not literally applicable. Metaphors occur frequently in every language and are used to conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another. Everyday abstract concepts like time, change, causation and purpose can be expressed metaphorically. These images add great strength to the communication. For example:

- “We’re heading for the rocks.”
- “The project fell over at the first hurdle.”
- “This is an enormous roadblock to our plans.”
- “Heavy-handed policy.”
- “Grass-roots organization.”
- “Out of the mainstream.”

It is even more powerful to extend the metaphor as an umbrella concept to provide a framework on which to base subsidiary images. For example, several metaphors relating to a ship can be used as long as the image isn't strained in order to get the extra effect. For example, steering the right course, sailing through stormy seas, fair weather, navigating a difficult course, etc. And you can quote some of the best sayings around such as "Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm." (Publius Syrus ~100 BC).

Ensure the symbols and metaphors aren't overdone. It's counter-productive to weave too rich a tapestry of words, sights and sounds – the audience will get turned off. **And remember, avoid clichés like the plague! :)**

Research confirms that image-based words are stronger than concept-based words. This line of research compared the attributes of various leaders over time. The table below, based on the research, shows strong image-based words compared with concept-based words. Image-based words more easily aroused a sensory image in people's minds, thereby engaging listeners more fully. A leader who speaks with a "heavy heart" has more impact than a person with "sad news." Examples of image-based words compared with concept-based words are:

Image-based words	Concept-based words
sweat	work
hand	help
root	source
heart	commitment
explore	enquire
rock	dependable
grow	produce
journey	endeavor
path	alternative
dream	idea
imagine	think
listen	consider

If you are interested in turning your spoken words into a visually compelling and memorable message, let's have a conversation!