

How do your employees carry your company image?

In today's mobile and high-technology economy it is often very difficult to control the communications message that your employees are sending to the public. Yet failure to control this aspect can severely dent your professional reputation.

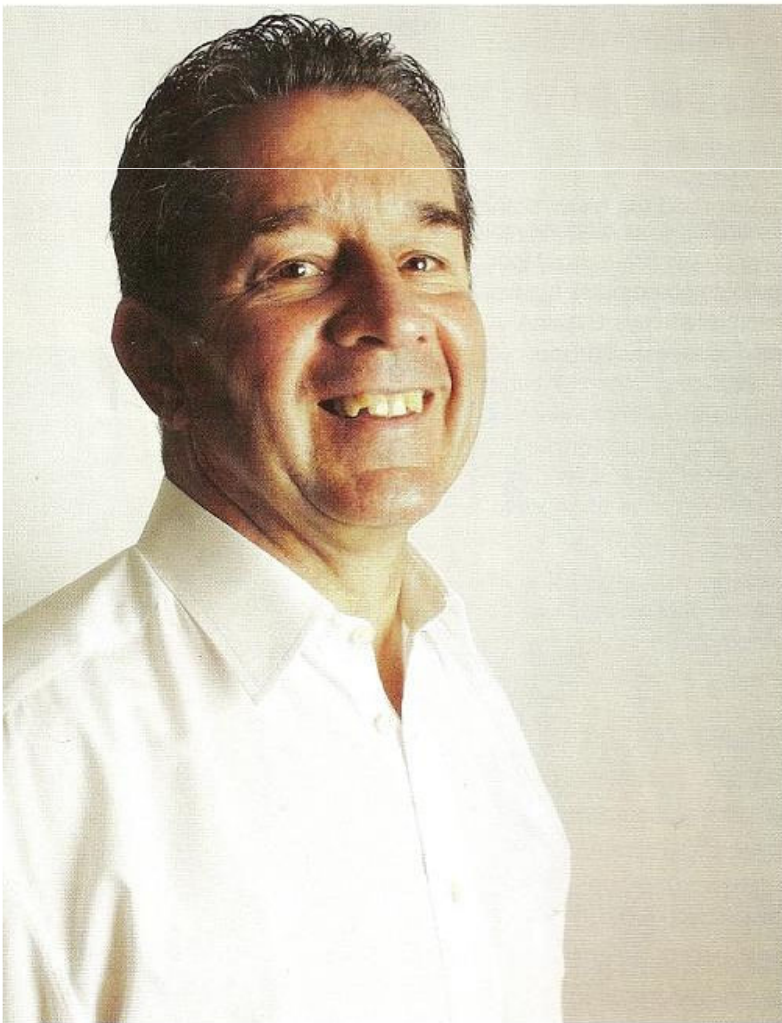
Business presentation and sales mentor, Errol van der Merwe, defines effective business communication as the

ability to structure and deliver a message effectively that a customer can understand. Communication, however, goes beyond a sales or marketing strategy. It also includes the way employees interact and communicate with one another within a company, and the public outside the company.

People and organisations that communicate well are often far more successful than those who cannot get a point across. According to Van der Merwe, business communication is a skill that should be taught at school and university level before people enter the workplace. Good communication can be taught to everybody. If employees are equipped with communication skills that go beyond functional English, they are more likely to be successful in business.

"People that communicate well, normally do well"

– Errol van der Merwe



The way business professionals communicate has changed over the past few decades. The way that communication is taught should also change to keep abreast of new developments. Employees should also make the effort to develop their personal skills. This includes public speaking through organisations such as Toastmasters. No matter how entertaining or interesting the topic, without effective delivery the message will be lost.

As technology has changed so have the methods of communication. A few years ago it would have been considered unthinkable to SMS a client to update them on the status of their project. However these less formal systems are now more

acceptable methods of communication and it is becoming harder for businesses to track and control the way that their employees communicate with clients and suppliers.

It is easy to create an improper image with electronic communications. "Abbreviated SMS and e-mail communication has crept into business communication and is not appropriate," says van der Merwe. Businesses need to educate their employees on how to communicate appropriately.

How often have managers of businesses had to reprimand employees for forwarding inappropriate jokes or video clips to colleagues or customers? In business, perception matters a great deal. Apart from the unprofessional image that joke e-mails create there is also a business cost in terms of broadband usage as large files are being mass-mailed to friends, colleagues and customers. This is a real-world problem that businesses need to be aware of and address.

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when employees represent their companies

Cell phones have also become a standard tool for business-to-business communication. Attention needs to be paid to aspects like employees' voicemail and personalised ring tones. While it might be amusing to have a humorous voicemail message on your phone, it will not be that amusing if a major client listens to a message you recorded detailing your antics on a recent night out. If employees use cell phones for business communication, they need to present a professional business message, which will reflect positively on the organisation.

Communication needs to be well planned and professional when employees represent their company.

Business communication standards could take the form of standardised templates for communication as well as group training on the right way to communicate in a professional environment. The training should include the use of technology such as e-mail and applications like PowerPoint.

People spend a lot of time educating their staff on how to conduct marketing and sales presentations. However they fail to realise that communication begins long before you meet the client face-to-face. "We tend to forget that the communication process begins from the moment you make first contact with somebody. The impression you leave will influence your relationship in future.

How do you speak on the phone? How do you draft e-mails? How do you dress when you arrive for a meeting?"

Van der Merwe describes an exercise that he does with delegates during training sessions. He introduces a complete stranger to the audience. The stranger says nothing and is asked to leave the room after a few minutes. Van der Merwe quizzes the delegates on what they believe the personality of the stranger to be. Delegates often launch into their opinions of music taste, dating profile and general lifestyle. This proves to the delegates that assessments of people are often made on a first impression, and illustrates how important it is to make a good first impression.

Many organisations employ public relations practitioners to provide expertise in the deliverability of their corporate message. Van der Merwe is all for their inclusion because they bring valuable skills to the party including established relationships with the media and experience in communications. However, he emphasises that the employees of the company remain the face of the organisation. **S**

Errol van der Merwe is an independent tactical mentor with a passion for developing effective business communication skills.

His focus is the delivery aspect of business communication ie. how people present themselves before, during, and after the business communication process. Errol has a 35-year career in the IT industry with more than 20 years in management to managing executive level. He has extensive sales and marketing management experience and has also been an advanced presenter and speaker with Toastmasters International for the past 22 years.

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