



Perceptionomics

Mark Fletcher-Brown

Perceptiononomics

60 ways to change how people see things
(and how to spot when it's being done to you)

Mark Fletcher-Brown

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*This booklet is dedicated to the memory
of the late Jason Ditton – a friend, mentor
and an inspiration.*

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Introduction

An odd thought occurred to me recently: despite working in communications for more than 25 years, I can't recall having a single conversation with a fellow practitioner about the mechanics of communications, the *how* and *why* it works.

I started reflecting on this and another thought popped into my mind: most of what I do in communications is concerned with changing how people see things. It's about perception management.

So this note is my starter for ten about how we, in communications, change perceptions.

I hope it will serve two purposes. First, it could be an aide-memoire to practitioners.

Second, it may interest those who wonder why their views about things can be so radically altered by public opinion-formers, social media, eye-catching news and campaigns. It may help such shifts make sense – and may help them resist attempts to sway their opinions.

So what follows is a list of techniques and approaches. I would not recommend them all. Some are highly questionable – creating fake news, disinformation,

and seeding doubt, for example. But I have included them because it's clear that they are used.

If anyone is interested in finding out more about my take on communications, I have created a series of masterclasses. These are available at commsmasterclasses.com. They are based upon my work as a practitioner, a journalist and an academic.

Mark Fletcher-Brown

Outcomes

PEAK communications: changing Perceptions,
Emotions, Actions and Knowledge.

“Communications” is not just about informing people or about “engaging” with them. All too often it is used to change the way that people see things. The way that people perceive things is often a product of what they know, feel and believe about the subject in question.

All too often, my clients are concerned about the delivery of four outcomes. These are easily remembered by the acronym PEAK.

1. Change **P**erceptions.
2. Change **E**motions – how people feel about things, people, causes and so on.
3. Prompt or nudge **A**ctions – to cause people to do things that they might not otherwise do.
4. Inform people – **K**nowledge.

These four outcomes are not mutually exclusive. Often, they’re inextricably linked.

Perceptions can be changed when people know things of which they were previously ignorant.

They may be changed when people feel differently about something.

And a shift in perceptions can cause people to do things that they would not otherwise do.

But it's not straightforward. There is no silver bullet. One size will not fit all. Even the same individual may be affected by a variety of known and unknown influences. And the same information will affect a variety of people differently. Outcomes, though, will depend upon *who the people are* – and how they see the world.

In communication, people are called publics, or audiences.

Audiences

An audience is a group of people that share a common set of defining characteristics. They have something in common. And it is that defining feature that is used to engage or communicate with them.

An audience may be a single person. And in order to engage that person, we will need to understand who they are, how they see the world, how they make judgements and so on.

Where an audience is a number of people, it can be harder still to understand these factors.

But using insight, gained from observation, analysis, testing (through focus groups), research or others' work, it is possible to find ways of gaining their attention and being able to present information to them in ways that alter their perceptions.

The Change Engine

A look at the drivers for change.

Credible Repetition or Exposure
Messages
Availability
Recipient Design
The Line of Least Resistance
Reviewing and Adjusting
Insight
Acumen
Us

If communications is a means of changing perceptions, how then does it work? What is the engine of change? Here are some thoughts.

Credible Repetition or Exposure

If a credible person or organisation repeats the same message over and over people could eventually believe them and act on that information.

For credible repetition to work, the person or organisation sharing the information needs to be seen to be credible *in the eyes of the relevant audience*. Further, the information needs to be shared *in the same form* repeatedly. The words are chosen because they are most likely to appeal to the target audience. Change the words and that effect may be lost.

The same effect may be achieved through exposure, by repeating behaviours, for example. A leader may alter others' actions or attitudes by repeatedly behaving in particular ways. One who extols punctuality by repeatedly appearing on time will encourage others to do the same. This can be called *setting the tone*.

Messages

What we say matters. Words have an impact on what people know, feel and do. Messages are short forms of words designed to achieve specific outcomes.

Once a message has been settled on, it will be repeated. Varying the choice of words undermines the “message” since this may alter what the words mean to an audience. Typically, words will be familiar and attractive- they will mean something to *them*.

Importantly, messages will also be conveyed through our actions. And where there is a discrepancy between our words and actions, we’re probably going to be judged on the latter.

Availability

This *heuristic* suggests people make up their minds on the basis of available information. Starved of alternative facts, people will then be forced to use existing information. In part then, control the information available and perceptions can be affected. Overwhelming people with one version of the facts can potentially skew perceptions.

Recipient Design

Messages – words, actions or both – are designed with an audience in mind specifically to bring about PEAK outcomes. A message may be shaped to inform people, change how they feel, change what they do and change how they perceive something. Each will depend upon the particular audience: different strokes for different folks.

The Line of Least Resistance

A working assumption is that most people will not work any harder than they have to. They will take the line of least resistance. Communication that offers an easy way to understand something will be more attractive and garner more attention than that which requires effort. The more our communications are consumption-ready, shaped for the audience in mind, the more effectively we will reach those people and potentially alter their perceptions.

Reviewing and Adjusting

Always: what works is what matters. Communications will be continually reviewed to determine whether

the plan or key actions have delivered. Or whether it has produced perverse outcomes – the opposite of what was intended or worse. Reviewing then adjusting will improve the chances of delivering the intended outcomes.

Insight

Increasingly, the creation of outcomes depends upon gathering insight – knowing how different people will react to different information. Micro-communication, using information at a one-to-one level, is the new engagement. It's at the heart of how successful platforms such as *Facebook* work.

We know insight works because it's how we operate in our real lives. We can persuade people because we know them. If we are going to successfully “land” our messages and bring about change in the minds of our target audiences, we need to understand how they think, how they make sense of the world (the concepts, ideas and words they use), their values as well as their hopes, fears and beliefs.

Insight can be research based or draw from our own observations. Ideally, it should be as fresh as possible – the world changes, as do attitudes, as do people.

Acumen

This is sometimes called “nous”. It’s about seeing problems before they appear, about being *street smart* and about understanding how different people might read or interpret something.

Developing acumen requires tuning into others’ motives, seeing the world from their point of view and anticipating both their plans and how they will achieve them.

Acumen allows you to anticipate how people may make judgements and to use that information to enable you to present things to them to your advantage.

Us

Whilst we may focus on an audience we must always have ourselves in mind. We are communicating. Whether that's as an organisation or as individuals, we frame the messages and the actions. The way in which an audience perceives us will have an impact on how our messages and actions are received. If we lose credibility, so does our message.

60 Ways To Change How People See Things

Given the complexity of perception management, there are many things that may be deployed to shape or affect the way that people see things.

As a broad principle, it's not the thing itself that matters, but what it means to the audience or audiences with whom we are communicating. With that in mind, treat what follows as notes – starting points for further reflection.

I've broken them down into four broad areas:

- **Contextual** – where meaning can be altered by changing the space within which things are presented or located.
- **Psychological** – where an understanding of how people think can help alter meaning.
- **Tactical** – where meaning may be altered by focusing on hows, wheres and whens.
- **Textual** – where the focus is on words and language to alter meaning.

These are not mutually exclusive categories. There is, inevitably, a high degree of overlap. But it should make it easier to access the material.

Contextual

Where meaning can be altered by changing the space within which things are presented or located.

Framing

Juxtaposition

Kuleshov Effect

Labelling

Relativity

Renorming – Selling a New Normal

Zeigarnik

Zeitgeist

Framing

By framing, we are attempting to cause people to take on board an interpretive framework. We are providing the context that gives meaning to our message. The best way to frame perceptions is to try to ensure, if possible, that your context is used.

We may use powerful language, eye-catching events, striking images or timing our communication to frame someone or something. But we are less powerful than the media which, by virtue of a defining headline or a label, can frame someone or something in ways that fix their meaning in the minds of an audience.

The mass media are able to create and reinforce their frame through the stories they choose to write – and the way in which they are written.

Juxtaposition

It's possible to say things, to convey ideas, or to make statements by simply putting one form of words, one person or one thing next to another. Perceptions are altered through proximity.

You can avoid making an explicit comment about anything but allow the placement to speak for itself. Doing so can cause an audience to *draw their own conclusions*.

Simply saying one thing then saying another may cause people to speculate about what you are really saying, which can be heightened by removing the opportunity for further clarification.

Juxtaposition can also work by putting images next to text. This can help to frame the text and alter its meaning, particularly if the image is powerful.

But beware: it's possible to inadvertently give rise to meaning by not considering this effect and in doing so, creating unhelpful outcomes.

Kuleshov Effect

Images can alter perceptions through framing. The Russian film director Lev Kuleshov intercut three shots of a Russian silent film star with three images: a glamorous young woman, a dead child in a coffin and a bowl of soup. Audiences were reportedly impressed by the subtle shifts in the actor's performance, saying that he conveyed, in turn, lust, grief and hunger. Yet the performances were not so much nuanced as the same. Kuleshov simply used the same footage of the actor repeatedly.

The Kuleshov¹ effect demonstrates how our perceptions may be primed by the impact of strong images, causing us to perceive the same thing differently. See *Captions* (page 81).

¹ See Nick Chater, *The Mind is Flat: The Illusion of Mental Depth and The Improvised Mind* (p.91).

Labelling

People will use labels as a short cut to perceiving something. Labels work fantastically well with our lazy brains. When we have a label for something, we know what it is instantly. Labelling can fix an idea of something or someone in an audience's mind.

Labels can also affect behaviour, causing people to behave as their label might imply, as sociologists' work on so-called "deviants" has demonstrated.

When a highly credible person or organisation attaches a label to someone, it could effectively remove their right of reply. We might say they *doth protest too much* when all they may be doing is responding to inappropriately attached meaning.

So label with great care. People may welcome positive labels but rarely anything else.

Relativity

It can be hard to perceive something if we do not know what it is. Is the amount of litter a family generates every year a lot or a little? Describe it in tons and it will sound like a lot. But to get a real sense of scale in a way that might alter perceptions use something that they may be familiar with – the size of Wembley Stadium. How big? *Big!*

By presenting something unknown relative to something known, perceptions can be shifted. In changing perceptions, we may choose different things, depending upon what reaction and outcomes are sought.

The key is in both choosing something that the audience can relate to and in ensuring that you do not inadvertently trivialise or unhelpfully alter meaning by picking the wrong thing.

Renorming – Selling a New Normal

Often people are more prepared to accept something if it appears to be the norm, if everyone else (or people like them) are doing it.

But what if you are trying to create something – a behaviour or an attitude – that is nowhere near the current norm? Enter re-norming. This is a form of incremental change where each iteration is re-presented, over time, as a new norm. So what starts off as apparently outlandish becomes the new normal.

But it's a bit like crossing a river using stepping-stones. It's only when you're half way out that it's clear how far you've come. At each *new normal*, the messaging would convey normality rather than the sense of distance from the original norm. *This is normal now.*

Zeigarnik

Making something memorable can affect perceptions.

Bluma Zeigarnik observed when eating in a restaurant that waiters who had not fully delivered an order were more likely to remember the items than those who had fully delivered the order. Later confirmed through research, Zeigarnik discovered that recall was greater for unsatisfied needs than those that had been satisfied.

“Strong needs, impatience to gratify them, a child-like and natural approach— the more there is of these, the more will unfinished tasks enjoy in memory a special advantage over those which have been completed.”²

So if you want people to remember something, make it part of a yet-to-be-completed list. There was one other thing...

² On finished and unfinished tasks by Bluma Zeigarnik “Über das Behalten von erledigten und unerledigten Handlungen,” Psychologische Forschung, 1927.

Zeitgeist

We interpret events, things and actions in the context of the time within which we live. What is acceptable now may change tomorrow. The Zeitgeist will alter meaning.

Literally, it means *the spirit of the age*. Practically, it's about being aware of the things going on in the world, how they are seen and how that may affect how your audiences may perceive things. So when thinking of Zeitgeist, think broad context or the setting within which action will be – or could be – understood.

One challenge is the lag between the time when you are planning your messages or campaign and the time when it is released into the world. The meaning of things can shift very quickly.

Single events can literally reframe the way that we (generally) see things.

Finding ways of reading or predicting the Zeitgeist is important since it can have a significant impact on the outcomes you are trying to create.

Psychological

Where an understanding of how people think can help alter meaning.

Attention

Beliefs

Benefits – Wants and Needs

Confirmation Bias

Emotions

Intersubjective Realities

Likeability

Most People – Norm-Based Messages

Preconceptions

Proxies

Recency

Senses

Trust

Attention

Getting attention is essential in altering perceptions. But it's important that you get the *right kind* of attention – to make sure doing so casts you in a good light.

Shock, counter intuition, strong imagery, emotive language, benefit-led messages, and making use of an audience's language will get you some kind of attention. But the wrong kind can get in the way of a message.

Imagine a doctor giving a patient bad news. Once the patient hears the words, "I'm afraid I've got some very bad news for you" anxiety may take over and everything else could get blocked out.

Measure how much attention you will get in seconds. And make best use of it in terms of achieving the outcomes you want.

Beliefs

Beliefs may shape perceptions. People's beliefs may potentially bypass their rational thought processes. A belief may create a form of confirmation bias where individuals may seek out things that confirm their view of the world and help them downplay or ignore that which potentially contradicts it.

To make use of others' beliefs in terms of how you might frame a message, you need to know what they are, how strongly they are held and what potential impact these may have. Some people hold very strong beliefs and a failure to take account of these can have a catastrophic impact on the way that your messages may be perceived.

Insight is crucial here.

Benefits – Wants and Needs

Something that is perceived to be beneficial is more likely to be attractive to an audience than otherwise. So to get positive attention offer, either explicitly or implicitly, a benefit – something they either want or, more importantly, need.

Broadly, the closer the benefits are to the start of the message, the more interesting they could be to your target audience.

So think: what's in it for them? If you are simply one of many clamouring for attention, you'll have to come up with more than saying, "Please listen!"

Importantly, different people will want and need different things. If you don't find out what they are first, you may be pushing things that are of no interest whatsoever.

Confirmation Bias

Things can be perceived positively if they are presented in a way that fits with an audience's existing beliefs or preconceptions. Confirmation bias refers to people's tendency to seek out views that agree with their existing beliefs or point of view.

This can make it easier to get your message across to an audience, provided you present it in a way that takes account of this bias. It's a form of communication sleight of hand. Sometimes such manipulation is teed-up with the phrase, "As you will know better than me..."

Confirmation bias is one of a number of unconscious biases of which you need to be aware. Understanding them is not enough. Even where people are aware of their tendency towards bias, they may still invoke them. They simply rationalise their biased decisions using other narratives.

Emotions

Anything that triggers an emotional reaction can affect perceptions. So information may be presented in ways designed to do just that. Different emotions (such as feel fear, anger, guilt, disgust or joy) may be triggered in different ways depending upon how audiences (or individuals) react to particular kinds of communication.

Images, trigger words, associations or emotional language can all affect our emotions. But they may be equally triggered by smells, textures or particular sounds. Some pieces of music can have powerful associations, instantly altering how we feel.

Keep in mind Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It's no accident that many successful campaigns are presented in the context of successful happy groups. We all want to belong – to something.

Intersubjective Realities

Yuval Harari talks about humans' ability to create and share inter-subjective realities as a defining feature of our development. It allowed us to create communities. This propensity means that people can share things that have no intrinsic meaning and treat them as real. Money is one such thing. It exists as numbers or symbols but is all too real in our culture.

People's propensity to see something that is not there is open to "management". The world, for example, can start to feel like a dangerous place if we are over-exposed to negative news. In fact, the world may not change significantly at all, but we see it may alter.

Perception management here relies upon understanding "the world" that people occupy and what matters within it.

Likeability

We may perceive people more positively if we like them. Broadly, the more likeable an individual is, the more they are likely to be forgiven errors, omissions, and misjudgements. Research in the US shows that surgeons who are more likeable but less competent are sued less frequently than those who are more competent but less likeable.

Some brands convey likeability by using humour or self-deprecation. We may also believe an individual to be likeable if they smile, use our names, appear to know us (here they can draw upon knowledge of our personal information) or act counter-intuitively. Likeability can be a disarming quality that can help sweeten pills at difficult times.

Likeability can create latitude.

Most People – Norm-Based Messages

Amazon's "People who bought this also bought..." is an example of a norm-based message. And describing anything as something that *most people* do can alter how we might perceive it.

Where we think that other people, particularly if they are like us, are doing something, then we are more likely to want to do it. So we can potentially change how an audience might perceive something if we can make it seem as if everyone else is doing it already.

When you hear the phrase, "Most people like us..." be wary of what comes next.

We can find norm-based messaging attractive if we particularly want to belong to the group being invoked. It's Maslow again: we all want to belong – and often to groups that are higher status and exclusive.

Preconceptions

Preconceptions can frame how things are seen. So in seeking to alter perceptions we will first have to understand what an audience's preconceptions are and why they exist.

It may be that their preconceptions are wide of the mark and unless they are challenged, they may cause us harm as we may be doomed never to be able to live up to them. Alternatively, they may benefit us and allow us to garner attention and interest we may not otherwise have had.

Professions may benefit from preconceptions conferring credibility and trust upon all individuals bearing those labels. *Trust me, I'm a doctor.*

Proxies

Proxies can shape perceptions.

So complex is daily life that most of us cannot make sense of it without using proxies. We may judge a person not on a full assessment of their character, their promises, their track record, and what others say about them. Rather, we may rely upon a few proxies: their friendliness, ease with company, likeability, amount of eye contact they make, and the firmness of their handshake.

When managing perceptions, we should know what proxies our audiences may use to make sense of something – or someone.

In an attention-depleted world, proxy management may be the best chance we get to change how we, or our organisation, are seen.

Recency

The more easily something can be brought to mind, the more likely it will be taken into account in our thinking. From a perception management point of view, this could mean reminding an audience of something that they may have forgotten about, particularly if it could significantly affect how they feel about someone or something.

Election campaigns will often dredge up things from the past so that the electorate is reminded of pertinent events or actions that could affect their voting decisions.

Recency can also apply where someone is profoundly affected by the last person they've spoken to. Where someone is suggestible in this way, timing your comments so that you are last to speak may be vital. If you're too early, your views may be dismissed

It follows that anything you say or do may be brought up and used against you. It can force leaders to either focus on making bland statements or to say things that are so couched in caveats that it's hard to work out what they're saying. But it is one way of avoiding being bitten by past utterances.

Senses

The way that senses are engaged – sight, smell, taste, touch and sound – will have an impact on the way that things are perceived. Houses, apparently, sell more easily if potential buyers smell fresh bread or freshly ground coffee as they enter the property. The house itself does not change but the way it is perceived – and those selling it – may alter. Someone unfortunate enough to suffer from body odour may completely reframe the way they are perceived by close colleagues.

When managing perceptions, it's important to engage, if possible, all senses. Each should say the same thing consistently. This may be why a haircut in an expensive salon jars when the coffee is of poor quality.

Trust

Trust is a critical factor in communication and can affect how something or someone is perceived. If people do not trust you, your message will be meaningless.

You should know how much your organisation or its senior leaders are trusted. It's probably a good idea to assume that trust is in constant need of being rebuilt so you can start to think about what actions your organisation should be seen to be taking in order to be seen to be more trustworthy.

And tempted as you will be, from time to time, to indulge in spin – causing things to be seen other than they might be – note that this too can erode trust in you, the media you use and your motives.

Tactical

Where meaning may be altered by focusing on hows, wheres and whens.

Accoutrements	Expectations
Angle	Extremes
Associations and Endorsements	Heavyweights
Barriers and Obstacles	Hostages to Fortune
Branding	Inaction
Complexity / Simplification	Leaks
Contrast	Loaded words
Defining moments	Memes
Disinformation	Passing Remarks
Disruption	Personalisation
Distraction and the Dead Cat	Pictures
Doubt	Piggybacking
Equivocation	Spin
	Symbols
	Timing

Accoutrements

Objects can affect perceptions. The things, clothing, artefacts and other bits and pieces that can be or are associated with an individual or an organisation can create meaning.

But if they are to convey a message, we need to understand what different things will mean to the audiences looking at them – what do these things say about you to them?

Judgements may have to be carefully calibrated and judged. For example, a leader who dresses casually to appear approachable may inadvertently convey disrespect. Similarly, someone driving a new car may convey both success and *egregious wealth*.

There is always a risk in using things to say something about yourself that you depart from who you really are and appear disingenuous. Those looking at you may judge you in terms of authenticity and consistency rather than products.

Angle

An angle is a way into a story. It's a point of entry that will make a story (which is itself a *construction*) more interesting, entertaining, maddening, or engaging than alternative versions.

Different angles may give rise to different perceptions. For example, someone constantly battering an organisation with complaint letters could be an irritant (eating up valuable staff time) or they could be David to their Goliath seeking redress following an injustice.

Changing an angle can alter how an audience perceives “the facts”.

The media have a powerful role in framing here. A powerful story can thereafter define the way in which an individual or an organisation is seen.

Associations and Endorsements

Associations with *known individuals* can alter how other people are seen. Think Celebrity Power. Someone who is well known, respected and highly credible can add their weight to another's name or activity.

What would Nike have been without Michael Jordan? A tick rather than a symbol that exudes success and personal achievement.

The question is: *what do you want to say about yourself and how might an endorsement or an association help?*

There is always a risk in choosing someone to endorse your actions that their presence completely overshadows yours.

Barriers and Obstacles

When people say “no” to an idea, they are erecting a barrier. Barriers may get in the way of altering perceptions. So when seeking to persuade someone to undertake a particular activity, you might list the reasons they might say “no”. You can then systematically overcome each of their objections. This can help you structure your messages or plan the timing of your activity.

You can find out what any potential barriers may be by talking to people in your target audience. Focus groups may help.

Sometimes barriers are less obvious. Others may put them there deliberately in order to block your activity. They may take many forms: spreading doubt, creating panic, fear, uncertainty or anxiety. Work out whether barriers can be overcome – or not.

Branding

Brands can alter perceptions. A brand represents the *total promise* an organisation or individual makes to its customers and potential customers. A brand will encompass words, actions, behaviours, promises, colours, typefaces – the works. Brands differentiate us from our competitors.

Consumers look for congruence (all the elements should make sense and fit together) and consistency (the brand should be the same on different days and where it is delivered through different people).

Find out how your customers perceive your brand. If you are acting to create a particular perception, check whether the brand is perceived as intended.

Some people have personal brands. This can frame how an audience perceives all their communication and actions. You should be clear about what your brand is – and what may be expected of you – so that you can ensure that you are consistent and true to your brand promise.

Complexity / Simplification

We can affect the chances of something being perceived by either making it more complex or simpler – the simpler, the bigger the potential audience.

We can simplify by using language that is easy to understand, vocabulary that is general and concepts that a wide variety of audiences can easily relate to.

Simplification can involve relying upon common words, avoiding jargon, short sentences, short paragraphs and overall short communications.

To make something less accessible, make it look like too much effort. Enter complexity.

The more complex your message is, the smaller the potential audience. This could involve including jargon, using long sentences, little understood concepts, acronyms and references that require specialist knowledge.

Anything that requires prior knowledge or footnotes³ can further diminish attention.

³ By the time you've read and digested the footnote, attention might have dissipated.

Contrast

Robert Cialdini suggests that we will judge something in comparison to something else, unconsciously. So if we want to alter how someone perceives something, we may first expose them to an alternative idea, one that will in turn make our core proposition more interesting or attractive to them.

Cialdini talks about how clothing stores instruct their sales staff to sell the most costly item to a customer first. So a person spending hundreds on a suit may then not balk at the idea of forking out additional money on shirts and ties. By contrast, they may actually look quite affordable.

Defining Moments

Defining moments are key experiences that can shape our perception of an organisation or an individual. We may judge a restaurant in terms of the quality of its restrooms and the way it handles complaints – rather than the food. We may judge a person in terms of the way that they respond to criticism or the extent to which they show respect to others – rather than the quality of their work.

Importantly, you should understand the defining moments through which you or your organisation may be judged. Even so, sceptical people may ask: why are they polishing the floors when the building is falling down?

For more on defining moments – or moments of truth – see Jan Carlzon's excellent book.

Disinformation

Disinformation is a polite way of talking about creating untruths and lies. These days we'd call it "Fake News". And it can affect how we perceive something or someone. It often plays on confirmation bias since it panders to our wants, needs and fears.

The worst kind of disinformation is that which is carefully crafted and dressed to look credible and above reproach.

If you're caught creating or spreading disinformation, your credibility will suffer. Trust in you, or your organisation, will disappear swiftly and may never return.

If you suspect disinformation is in play, look at the motives of those who are spreading or creating it. You could find that in the rush to convey untruths, they are hiding more interesting facts.

Disruption

Disruption is one of way of changing the kind of attention that we might get. We can alter perceptions by jarring the way that things are seen and in challenging expectations.

When we disrupt current perceptions – by acting out of character, doing different things, shocking an audience, presenting ourselves in completely new ways or challenging expectations, we are disrupting. This can change the kind of attention we get – they may become more attentive or give our message more time than otherwise – and so alter the outcomes.

It is not without risk. Disruption may confuse your audiences and make them less certain about who and what you are.

Distraction and The Dead Cat

We can alter perceptions about something by getting an audience to focus on something else. This works because we all have limited attention spans and can only concentrate (in truth) on one thing at any point in time.

So when something is getting unwanted attention, one approach is to draw an audience's attention to something entirely different. Some spin doctors talk about Dead Cats, the idea being that when you throw one on the dinner table it's hard to talk about anything but. Not a pleasant thought.

Crucially, if people are talking about this new and shocking thing – whatever it is – then they're no longer paying attention to your story or situation.

Doubt

Allowing, or causing, doubt to creep into someone's mind can alter their perception of something. Seeding doubt can help to unhinge firm opinions.

Doubt can work with *Memes* (see page 68). Look at the phrase, “there is no smoke without fire”. It's a phrase that can significantly alter how we may see someone since can it foster doubt. We may also say, “methinks they doth protest too much”. Or we may question motives in another meme – *they always look out for Number One*. The doubt triggered by a meme can have a significant impact on the way that a person or organisation may be perceived.

Doubt is corrosive and because it can live at the level of suspicion or as a passing thought, it can be hard to refute. It can be hard to justify its use.

Equivocation

Missing things out when presenting information alters perceptions. Equivocation is a form of deception and can impact on credibility. So it is really about dissembling (or lying, as they say in less polite circles).

But it does raise the question about what you should include and exclude when communicating. Think about this from the audience's point of view: what would most reasonable people expect you to include? Also, consider how an audience might perceive you if they discovered which things you had excluded.

Clearly, you can't tell everyone everything. But you should have a rationale (a form of narrative) that enables you to reasonably explain why you included some parts rather than others. An alternative approach is to opt to be opaque and say nothing at all.

Expectations

Expectations can have an impact on perceptions. But first we must understand what an audience's expectations may be. People may have reasonable expectations of something or someone. These may be based upon experience or those derived from working with similar organisations or people. Some expectations may be created by what we say – our promises – or by what others say we should be saying or doing.

Managing expectations can affect how an audience may perceive something. The earlier we are able to do so, the more likely we will be able to exert influence. Expectation management is a form of framing, causing audiences to view information or actions through the lens we have created.

The general rule is to under-promise and over-deliver, which can work up to the point where your under-promising begs questions about what you are doing for the money they pay you.

Extremes

Presenting an extreme version of something can affect perceptions. Journalists sometimes use this in questions: isn't there a danger of.... It can create a strong emotional reaction (which can itself affect perceptions). It's a form of emphasis. It involves looking at the potential "what ifs", finding one that would profoundly affect how an audience feels about the issue or thing and then presenting this to them.

This frequently involves talking about what "could" happen. Of course, in life what matters is not just what could happen but what the likelihood of it occurring actually is. The sky could fall down today – but it's not very likely, really – although Chicken Licken would probably disagree.

Heavyweights

If a “heavyweight” adds their voice to something it is more likely to garner attention and be perceived as important. Heavyweights are people who will gain attention by virtue of their credibility, standing, or reputation.

Some professions may be considered naturally heavyweight: lawyers, doctors, senior civil servants, and politicians. Some acquire weight over time by being seen as credible and worthy of attention. An individual may have credibility in some circles but none in others.

Whilst heavyweights may add credibility, seriousness or urgency to a message their involvement may have to be carefully judged. Rolling out the big guns may trigger a feeling that perhaps you are trying too hard or you have something to hide.

Hostages to Fortune

Hostages to fortune are potential future events that could adversely affect perceptions in due course.

When thinking ahead, it means considering what could happen and what potential impact different scenarios could have on your plans. Identifying hostages involves looking at the potential worst cases and eliminating as much risk as possible.

Inevitably, change involves a degree of risk and it may not be possible to eliminate all potential hostages. But it is tempting to think over-optimistically about the future and to plan for the best outcomes in all circumstances.

Anything written down about an *interesting* or controversial subject could create a hostage: anything that can be leaked could be leaked and probably will be.

Inaction

People may perceive an organisation or individual not only in terms of what they do but also because of what they don't do.

Sometimes doing nothing is the right course of action. Focus on what either actions or inactions would mean to the audience with whom you are communicating. You might consider their expectations, the actions that you might previously have taken as well as those actions that might be reasonably expected of you.

In either action or inaction, meaning is not only derived from how your main audience might perceive this – other commentators could plough into the scene and express views. Their comments, particularly if they are credible, can add meaning – or even redefine your position altogether.

Inaction could mean: wait and see what happens next.

Leaks

We can alter how someone might perceive something by leaking information about it. Leaks represent something we really shouldn't be hearing about, so making the information more attractive and more likely to gain attention.

Unsurprisingly, planned leaks take advantage of this proclivity. So it's often in an organisation's interest to share information in this surreptitious way.

How? Brown envelopes, words in ears, stuff left on the photocopier or on a train or merely informing reliable journalists that you *really shouldn't be telling them this* and they must never reveal their sources. Another way is to ensure that when you leave a building that documents are facing outwards and may be easily photographed and shared with journalists.

The Leak Rule: the more sensitive the leak, the more chance of gaining the much-desired attention and coverage.

Loaded Words

Some words are so imbued with meaning that their inclusion in communication can affect an audience's perception either of the message or the organisation, or both. If you are in any doubt about whether or not to use a word you may believe to be negatively loaded, talk to people in the target audience.

There are many loaded words and phrases in existence and the inclusion of the more extreme here could significantly alter perceptions of this booklet. So I won't.

Memes

A meme can alter how we perceive something. For Richard Brodie, in *Virus of the Mind*, “A meme is a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more copies of itself get created in other minds”.⁴

Brodie talks about memes being shared and shaping behaviour, simple ideas, “common sense” governing our attitudes and behaviour. Memes such as “hard work pays” or “people who dress well do well” can shape attitudes change behaviour.

Memes can be destructive or constructive. Think about someone accused, and then acquitted, of wrong-doing faced with the meme “there’s no smoke without fire”. Thereafter, doubt may remain. But the meme giving someone the *benefit of the doubt* could create latitude.

⁴ Brodie, Richard, *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme* (p.11). Hay House. Kindle Edition.

Passing Remarks

Erving Goffman suggested that we are more likely to believe something if it is said in passing than if it sounds like a carefully crafted plea. In this sense, passing remarks can be powerful ways of changing perceptions. People may be more vulnerable to changing their minds when a passing remark is dropped into their ear. After all, it's only a passing thought.

But what sound like off-the-top-of-the-head remarks may be anything but. They can be carefully crafted pleas designed to make you mull when you're least expecting it.

Personalisation

One way to affect an individual's perception is to frame information in terms of what it could mean to them. Human-interest stories work this way, helping people to see often complex issues from a particular point of view.

Communication can be personalised through the choice of images, words or references that are made. Music can also help to personalise a message. Often, we find that the mix of stories that are presented in our news feeds are shaped with our interests in mind. This makes the content more compelling.

The more information you share – either consciously or inadvertently – with the services you use, the more such data can be used to personalise their communication with you. The social media giants are particularly good at this.

Pictures

A picture, with the right caption, can convey meaning far more quickly than words – and can alter perceptions instantly. Think of the chief executive accused of fraud (not convicted) standing beside an expensive car (taken from the picture library) and how that can affect how they are seen.

You can use pictures to frame information and to alter the way that an audience will interpret the words they see.

Importantly, pictures can create future risk. Chief Executives snapped with glasses of champagne (whatever the reason) may find this image plastered on the front page of the local press when they front up job cuts. Smart phones could be your nemesis.

Piggybacking

When we piggyback, we leap onto the back of others' interpretation of things for our own ends. If an issue is getting a lot of attention we may choose to use that and say, "Look here, that's what's happening to us."

Piggybacking makes use of existing perceptions and seeks to use them as a short cut to draw attention to our own concerns.

But just as we piggyback on others' issues, so they will do so with ours. Piggybacking is not without its risks. We may draw attention to an issue in a way that is less manageable since it involves others besides ourselves.

Spin

Spin is the art of selling alternative interpretations of things, events or people, principally through the media. It relies on either keeping things out of the media, in selling an alternative version of the story at hand (a new and more compelling angle) or in selling another (better story).

Perceptions are products of what we are able to perceive. These techniques may keep *unhelpful* versions out of the public gaze.

Here are some techniques deployed by the *doctors* in relation to the media.

- **A good day to bury bad news** – timing the release of bad news to coincide with an avalanche of other news thus starving the story of space and attention.
- **Guilt trip** – journalists are potentially compromised by the sense that they are letting someone down – usually the people who stand to lose from negative coverage. It's not business, it's personal.
- **I can make you look good** – an appeal to career-focused journalists. The journalist is promised a maximum entry pass, thus guaranteeing a flow of

great stories in return for not running a sensitive story. Jam tomorrow.

- **I wouldn't want to ruin a good relationship** – issuing a veiled threat to a journalist. *If you publish this story, I think it will be difficult for us to work together and life may become harder for you and so on.*
- **Kicking something into the long grass** – commissioning a report or setting up a working party to delay having to deal with something now. The report becomes the news, rather than the “story” itself.
- **My dad's bigger than your dad** – a threat to escalate a story, or a conflict, from a journalist to the editor – boss to boss. If the editor yields, the journalist is left high and dry.
- **The bad apple** – where a single individual is blamed and dismissed for a problem that has occurred. This avoids questions of systemic or cultural failures.
- **The past is another country** – basically, life has moved on, as have we. The story is no longer relevant.

- **The shut out** – refusing to talk to journalists, starving them of access to force them to give you better coverage. Short-sighted.
- **Trumping** – this can be used when a journalist has a potentially damaging story about you and they're given an even better offer, often sweetened with “exclusive access to decision-makers”.
- **Unavailable for comment** – an attempt to make the story less than it is by not offering a comment. Sometimes this is accompanied by a statement that removes the opportunity for live scrutiny.
- **We've learned lessons** – an attempt to move the story on. This statement, accompanied by contrite expressions from people with no connection to the event (thus avoiding questions of resignation) will be supplemented by information about the changes that have happened since.
- **Challenging credibility or motive** – an effort to question either the believability of the source or their motives in briefing journalists. Both may undermine confidence in the story itself.

Symbols

A symbol is something that stands in for something else and conveys meaning to the people perceiving it. They help us convey specific meaning very quickly, where that understanding is shared between two parties.

If you want to signal a particular message without having to spell it out to an audience you might deploy symbols to help you.

Different audiences may interpret symbols in different ways. So being aware of how others may read them will matter. It's also about calibrating meaning – saying the right thing in these circumstances in order to engage an audience and bring about a specific outcome.

Any doubters about the power of symbols to evoke strong emotions should simply look at the coverage of public statues or buildings bearing the names of former slave owners.

Timing

The timing of an action or word can affect perceptions. When thinking about the best time to release a message, to approach someone, to pitch an idea, to make a presentation, to intervene or to implement a plan, you will need to take account of the various factors that could contribute to its success or create barriers and precipitate failure.

The idea of timing, in other words, is about considering all of the factors and all of the risks associated with taking action – or inaction. As you consider each factor, weigh up the right time to make your intervention. How will the timing increase or decrease each factor's potential success?

Textual

Where the focus is on words and language to alter meaning.

Allusion

Anecdotes

Captions

Gossip

Headlines

Killer facts

Rhetoric

Slogans

Sound Bites

Stories

Allusion

We may want people to perceive something without actually saying anything. We may want people to *read between the lines*. So we allude to it, we hint, we allow the meaning to emerge and let them draw their own conclusions.

Allusions depend upon understanding the way that others are likely to *read our words and actions*. They allow us to cause thoughts to emerge in others' minds without having to be explicit. It's a form of constructive ambiguity, which can avoid being unhelpfully quotable.

You may think that; I couldn't possibly comment.

Anecdotes

When someone tells us an anecdote, a brief tale about something, it can alter how we perceive both that person and the subject itself. It feels personal. They may be sharing previously undisclosed information. And it will carry the weight of their credibility.

Carefully chosen anecdotes can alter perceptions provided that they are interesting, engaging and relevant to the audience listening. The way the speaker is currently perceived may add power to the story, causing us to see them in a new and interesting way.

The best anecdotes are crafted – stories with a point and a structure. If you want to use them to alter perceptions, think about how to best put your points across so that they engage and surprise your listeners. Think about how short stories work. It's often unexpected endings that stay with us – and make us want to share what we've heard.

Captions

Change the caption underneath a picture and you can alter how people perceive the subject of the photograph. Take a look at the examples below.

This may be a Kuleshov Effect (see page 27). In essence, the caption frames how we make sense of the subject. It may work in a similar way to the power of music to alter how we perceive the action on the screen.



Lucy (right) accused of imprisoning her mother.



Mary (89) looks forward to her new home.

Gossip

Passing information on as gossip can change how it's perceived. It can add spice, making it more attractive and likely to be shared, particularly if it plays into predisposition for *Schadenfreude* (the malicious delight in others' misfortunes). At the same time, it will be less credible.

Gossip can be protected by the meme "there's no smoke without fire" making even the least believable things worth repeating. Even a denial might invoke "Well, they would say that, wouldn't they?"

Deploying gossip to change minds could discredit you and affect future perceptions.

Headlines

Headlines grab our attention, frame what we subsequently read and affect how we might perceive the whole story. They are eye-catching and pique interest. You can think of them literally in terms of what you might put at the top of a news release, article, posting or advert. Your email header might also be an attention-grabbing piece of text.

Think about what you want your audience to focus on.

Give yourself five words. If you are using it for text, you may want to deploy the usual meaning-loaded words that grab attention in the tabloids. You may not use these literally but they can shape your thoughts. Arguably, if you can't sum up your message in a short headline, then the message is wrong.

Killer Facts

A killer fact is a fact that can alter how we see something and which we will want to tell others about. They can draw attention to a message and create an emotional reaction. Killer facts work by challenging preconceptions – and by being the kind of thing that you would want to share.

Examples

- *Three-quarters of UK children spend less time outside than prison inmates.* (Guardian).⁵
- *By the end of 2016, the number of displaced people had risen to 65.6 million – more than the population of the United Kingdom.* (WEF).
- *One in six people aged 55 to 64 owns a second property.* (Guardian).
- *The world lost more than one football pitch of forest every second of 2017.* (Guardian).

⁵ Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment pilot study: visits to the natural environment by children, 2016.

Rhetoric

Rhetoric can affect both how an audience perceives something and how it feels about it. The choice of language, the use of emotive words or shared references can help package your message and add both interest and weight. Brilliant rhetoric engages us.

And there are some rhetorical devices that can be used to add interest.

- **Three part lists** – *blood, sweat and tears.*
- **Contrasting pairs** – *Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.*
- **Alliteration** – *The People's Princess.*
- **Metaphor** – *there are more super tankers being turned around in organisational change that there are boats in the sea.*
- **Simile** – *working here is like swimming through treacle.*
- **Teeing phrases** – getting people ready to pay attention. *There are two key points to remember and they are...*

Slogans

Attach a slogan to an issue and it may be perceived differently. Memorable, repeatable phrases that convey meaning powerfully. They're designed to be catchy and engaging. Their success relies on repetition but if they're effective, the target audience will share them giving them extra life and reach.

Advertising slogans remind us of brands: *every little helps; because you're worth it; it's got our name on it.*

If your offer or promise is clear enough and you can reduce it to a few memorable words, you probably have a better chance of getting some of your audience's mind space. But be wary: memorable broken promises can be even more damaging.

Sound Bites

If we want to get an audience to perceive something, we need to make it as easy as possible for them to receive it. Sound bites can help.

Sound bites are forms of words created and structured to fit into short attention spans or media slots.

They use simple language, accessible concepts and *common sense*.

They are often self-contained, highly quotable and shareable. They sound as if they've actually been said (although they may never have been).

They can deploy striking images or ideas to capture attention, essentially shocking people into listening and to give them something to take away and use elsewhere.

Sound bites may be written to fit into a paragraph or dropped into a radio interview.

Stories

Stories help us to make sense of the daily complexities of others' and our lives. Locating someone or something in a story can affect perceptions.

We admire those who have risen from *rags to riches*, we warm to those who have *triumphed over apparent tragedies*. We will back the *David against Goliath*. And we delight in *the fall of the mighty*. Surprisingly, there aren't too many stories to choose from.⁶ For a rundown and a very interesting read, check out Christopher Booker's brilliant tome.

The problem with stories is that once something is framed within a single compelling narrative, it can be hard to change the way the central characters are subsequently perceived.

So tell stories with care. For those buried negative tales, there may not be a happy ending.

⁶ See Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots – Why We Tell Stories*.

Further Reading

Further Reading

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