Communicating with Clients

Introduction

Good communication is an essential part of library work. This section focuses on the skills you need to communicate with clients. Other sections deal with the skills required for communicating with colleagues.

When you have completed this section, you should be able to:

• describe different forms of communication and use them appropriately
• identify factors that affect the way people receive messages
• recognise how our values and attitudes affect the ways we communicate
• identify factors that affect the way we listen.

The main topics in this section are:

• 1. What is communication?
• 2. Forms of communication
• 3. Getting the message
• 4. Factors affecting communication
• 5. Listening
• 6. Putting it all together

What is communication? •1

Communication takes place when a message from a sender is received by a receiver. The receiver usually provides feedback to the sender, to show that the message has been received and understood.

To understand how messages get through, and why they don’t always succeed, we need to consider the sender, the message itself, the intended recipient of the message, and the factors that help or hinder the message being understood.

Forms of communication •2

People communicate in many ways. We need to appreciate that we often send messages we do not intend, and of which we are sometimes unaware. In this section we look at some of the common forms of communication.

The subtopics in this section are:

2a. Words
2b. Which language?
2c. Methods of communication
People commonly use words to communicate a message. However, words in themselves do not always have a clear meaning. People and situations give words their meaning.

Meanings depend on a number of factors, including people’s experience in associating words with particular things, people, emotions, and situations.

But each person draws on different experiences, and this can lead to misunderstandings, even when the same words are used.

Knowing the context in which words are used helps to clarify their meaning.

We use different languages to communicate with different people. Here are some of them:

- English
- another language (e.g., Vietnamese, Greek)
- sophisticated
- simple
- formal, polite
- informal, slang
- technical
- lay.

Our choice of language depends on the message we want to convey, the situation we are in, and our judgement about the most appropriate language for the receiver.

We communicate in many ways. Sometimes our choice of method is determined by convenience or chance. Often a particular method best suits our purpose.

Methods of communication include

- speaking face-to-face
- speaking by telephone
- writing a note
- writing a letter
- writing an email
- sending flowers
- leaving a message on a whiteboard.

When the message is especially important to us we tend to choose our method of communication with great care.

**Gestures**

People also communicate without words.

Much of people's verbal behaviour reflects what they think. Most nonverbal behaviour expresses how people feel.

Gestures are a large part of nonverbal behaviour. Since many gestures are involuntary, we need to be especially conscious of them. If we want positive communication, our gestures must all be positive ones.

Most of us have some distracting mannerisms - drumming your fingers, tapping a pencil, playing with your hair or scratching your head. You need to be aware of these habits and try to control them, as they can interfere with the messages you wish to send.

**Visual images**

Ideas and information are also communicated using images. Some commonly used symbols are understood by most people in a community in a similar way. This depends largely on the familiarity of the images, and the shared experience of the people looking at them.

Traffic signs, for example, communicate a standard set of messages to Australian drivers, since recognition of the symbols is part of our driver education.

Some photographs represent a situation so clearly that they are understood by a majority of their viewers. Others can be interpreted in a variety of ways by different people.

**Emotions**

People use facial expressions to communicate their emotions more fully than other species.

**Appearance**

Our appearance usually expresses many of the ways we think about ourselves, and the way we want others to see us. We use clothes, hairstyle, makeup, and so on to reflect our personality, and often our lifestyle.

Many people make strong statements through their appearance. They may reject society's values about tidiness, cleanliness, and appropriateness. For example, a teenage girl who dresses in black for her sister's church wedding is indicating her unwillingness to
We can often tell people’s occupations - e.g., manual or office worker - by the way they dress.

However, be careful not to make assumptions about clients’ standard of education, attitudes or information needs because of their appearance.

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**Size, position, location**

The physical space we put between ourselves and others can communicate feelings of familiarity or strangeness, like or dislike. We are much more comfortable standing physically close to people when we also feel emotionally close to them.

When we stand too close to - or too far away from - a client, we may make them uncomfortable, or feel discomfort ourselves. Try to adjust your position to ensure that it does not affect your communication.

In the workplace, status and power are often expressed by a person’s office, furniture, and furnishings. The larger the office or desk, the thicker the carpet, the higher within the building, the more important and powerful a person is likely to be.

Space, distance, and location communicate many messages to us, even though their interpretation may vary according to the receiver’s background and experience.

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**Getting the message**

When someone is communicating effectively, the person to whom the message is directed interprets it in the way the sender intended.

People receive messages in different ways for a number of reasons. It is useful to consider the factors that cause people to interpret communication differently.

It is also important to provide feedback to the sender, so that they know whether their message is being received, and how it is understood.

The subtopics in this section are:

3a. Perception
3b. The receiver
3c. Feedback

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**Perception**

Perception is the way we see, hear, and feel the world around us. It is how we absorb and interpret the information available to us.

Different people see the same things differently. This is especially true when the message is complicated or unclear. The way people understand a message is influenced by their previous experience, and the meanings similar messages have carried for them.
If, for example, a visual image holds a special significance, making fun of that image is offensive or distressing. Think of the reaction of a patriotic person to ‘misuse’ of the national flag, or of a religious person to the lampooning of a religious image.

The receiver

Effective communication takes into account the needs of the receiver.

If you share understanding and/or experience with the receiver, your task is easier. There is much you can leave out, since you can assume the receiver already knows some of what you need to communicate.

To send a message that will be understood, consider these factors:

• language - is it appropriate?
• context - does the receiver know and/or understand the context?
• experience - does the receiver share the experience of the sender?
• can the receiver provide feedback?

Feedback

Good communication includes letting the other person know whether or not their message is ‘getting through’. This feedback forms an important part of all effective communication.

• Positive feedback involves
• Listening attentively
• Asking questions to clarify meaning
• Demonstrating empathy verbally and nonverbally
• Encouraging the speaker to give more detail
• Clearly expressing your own point of view.

Negative feedback involves

• Not listening
• Patronising the speaker
• Attacking the speaker’s self-image
• Giving insincere reassurance
• Not taking other people’s ideas or feelings seriously
• Dominating with your own point of view.

Ambiguous feedback leaves the other person not knowing whether you understood the message, or how you feel about it.

Factors affecting communication

There are many other factors that also affect the way messages
The subtopics in this section are:
4a. Individual and cultural differences
4b. Values and attitudes
4c. Stereotypes and assumptions
4d. Environment
4e. The way a message is sent
4f. Barriers to communication

**Individual and cultural differences**  • 4a

There are individual and cultural differences in the way people communicate.

For example, as a library staff member, you are probably comfortable making eye contact with clients, and regard it as a measure of interest, respect, and even honesty. However, for some clients eye contact is not appropriate. There are those whose social or cultural group attributes disrespect to this behaviour. Some individuals have a physical difficulty in maintaining eye contact. Others are shy, or feel they may appear overfamiliar.

Communicating with people with disabilities can also present challenges. You must be able to communicate clearly, making provision for any special need - e.g., a hearing difficulty - without treating the person differently from others.

**Values and attitudes**  • 4b

Values are beliefs about the purpose of living and the standards of behaviour by which we live and expect others to live.

These beliefs are often held very deeply, and have a powerful influence on our communication with others. Since we are often unaware of these values and the ways they affect our communication, it is useful to try to identify and understand them.

Attitudes are a more concrete reflection of our values. That is, we feel, behave and communicate in particular ways because of the values we hold.

Attitudes to others affect our relationships, and may inhibit our communication with clients. If we do not like someone, or find him or her irritating or frustrating, we are likely to communicate differently, even though we may not be conscious of it.

**Stereotypes and assumptions**  • 4c

We all make assumptions about people because of the way they look, dress, or speak.

When we assume that people will think or behave in a particular way because they are female, have dark skin, speak with an accent, wear a suit or overalls, look wealthy or poor - when we
This affects the way we communicate with them. We may not hear what they want to say, or we may communicate inappropriately, because we think we know who they are, what they think, or how they will behave.

Environment

Our environment is not always conducive to good communication.

It is very difficult, for instance, to have a conversation with someone in an office if the phone rings constantly. Giving a talk in a room with a lawnmower outside the window is not the easiest of tasks.

A warm and trusting psychological environment also assists people to communicate effectively. The more comfortable people feel with each other, the better their communication is likely to be.

The way a message is sent

When you communicate, you usually convey two messages: a verbal message, and a nonverbal message.

A supervisor may say to a new staff member ‘Ask me for help whenever you need to.’ But every time the new person asks for help, the supervisor is too busy, or in a hurry, or seems irritated or impatient. The staff member will very soon get the (nonverbal) message that the supervisor didn’t really mean the offer of help.

When the verbal and nonverbal messages do not coincide, the nonverbal is usually more accurate, since it communicates the way the person feels. People are usually less aware of their nonverbal communication, and do not control it as well as the verbal messages they give.

Listening

Listening is an essential part of communication. Yet most people concern themselves more with how they deliver a message than with how well they listen to the messages others send them.

The subtopics in this section are:

5a. Listening skills
5b. Factors that affect listening
5c. Bad listening habits
5d. Good listening
5e. Telephone communication

Listening skills

How well do you listen? What steps have you taken to improve your listening skills? How often has someone said to you: ‘Did you hear what I said?’; ‘Stop that and listen to me!’; ‘Just shut up and listen!’;
As you improve your listening skills, you will also improve your speaking ability. Identifying the aspects of speech that make it easier for you to listen well will help you to express your ideas so that others hear you more effectively.

Learning to listen is best done by practice. You also need to identify, and try to correct, the bad listening habits you undoubtedly have (since almost everyone does).

### Factors that affect listening

There are many factors that influence the quality of your listening. They include:

**The speaker**
- Voice quality - too soft, loud, fast, slow, monotonous, etc.
- Nervousness - stuttering
- Lack of interest in what he/she is saying
- Distracting mannerisms - sniffing, tapping the table
- Inappropriate language - too difficult, condescending

**The listener**
- Not concentrating
- Not interested
- Not knowing enough about the subject
- Being preoccupied with something else
- Attitude to speaker - dislike, envy
- Tiredness, illness, pain

**External factors**
- Heat or cold
- Noise
- Other demands on the listener’s attention.

### Bad listening habits

These are all common bad listening habits.

- Thinking about something else at the same time
- Pretending to pay attention
- Judging the speaker’s appearance or presentation
- Switching off because you think you won’t understand
- Thinking of what you want to say before the speaker has finished
- Mentally disagreeing before the speaker finishes
- Disliking the speaker and so not wanting to listen
- Getting emotional about particular words or expressions
- Deciding prematurely that the topic is not interesting.

**Good listening**

Listening well requires practice, and overcoming any bad listening habits.

**Attending**, so that the other person feels that you are interested in his or her message, is achieved by

- making eye contact
- smiling, nodding
- facing the person
- making encouraging noises such as ‘mmm’, ‘go on’.

**Active listening**, when you want to draw out the speaker, involves

- attending skills
- observing the other person’s nonverbal behaviour
- asking questions for information and clarification
- repeating or paraphrasing what the other person says
- summarising what you have understood.

**Telephone communication**

Telephones are a vital part of the equipment of a library. Many clients make their first contact by phone, and need to feel comfortable communicating with a member of the library staff in this way.

The major difficulty of phone communication is that you cannot see the other person. This means that much of their nonverbal communication is not available to you, or yours to them.

You must therefore rely much more on verbal messages, and subtle nonverbal clues such as tone of voice and pauses.

You will need to use your listening skills to provide the necessary feedback - making encouraging noises, asking questions, repeating what you are being told, and summarising the other person’s message.