

# Blue Ribbon Business

Business Management and Leadership Topics for the Horse Industry

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

## Communication Essentials

**W**hen all is going well, communication is like a zipper, one tooth interlocks evenly with the next providing smooth operation. What about when the zipper jams at the outset? The teeth just don't engage each other and nothing happens. Sometimes two teeth are crammed into the spot of one, or the fabric gets caught into the zipper part way up. This serves as a glitch in operations. Most frustrating of all, what about the times the zipper works as it should, only to separate in the middle and unravel to both ends? This demonstrates that what you think is a fait accompli isn't always.

As a professional in the horse industry you have had these experiences in different settings. As an instructor, communication effectiveness is crucial. Some students seem capable of tuning in to your thought process. Yet there are always students that you struggle with in trying to get a concept across to. As a stable manager and employer, communication effectiveness is just as crucial. Your help needs to know what needs to be accomplished and when. You also need to establish a rapport with your employees in order for you all to work productively together, and to best meet the needs of the clients. As a horse business owner, communication effectiveness still takes center stage. You need to be able to market your business, and thus communicate to your audience. You also need to be able to communicate with your vendors, banker, insurance company, accountant, farrier, veterinarian and others.

Think about these things for a few moments:

*"... the purpose of communication is to reduce uncertainty."*

How many times have you tried to define or explain a new concept, i.e. half-halts, and only had your students become more confused instead of more understanding?

*"Misunderstanding is common because clarity of communication does not happen... Fortunately, absolute clarity is unnecessary; effective communication is accomplished when the amount of clarity or accuracy achieved is sufficient for handling each situation."*

Only about 60% of spoken information is accurately received. No wonder teaching new riding and work skills is a demanding task. With this in view, give yourself, your students and your employees a pat on the back for all your successes.

*"The communication process is complex... the meaning one person has is never identical to that which another person has because meanings are in people's minds, not in the words they use."*

Consider jargon, buzz-words, and semantics here. Engagement means one thing to a seasoned rider, but a newcomer to the sport might wonder why anyone would want to marry a horse.

*"Good 'hearing' is not necessarily good 'listening'."*

Take a few more minutes and think about the fact that only 7% of communication is verbal. Vocal

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content accounts for 38%, and visual content accounts for 55%. On top of that, during our lifetime we spend about 9% of our time writing, yet we get 12-13 years of schooling for this. We spend 14% of our time reading, and get 6-8 years of schooling for this. We spend 32% of our time speaking, and get 0-2 years schooling for this. 45% of our time is spent listening, but are we ever given schooling for this? It's no wonder we are always looking for ways to improve our communication skills!

Given that effective communication is so necessary and at the same time so complex, what is it comprised of? Effective communication is two way. A free flow of ideas, attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and feelings moves from one person to another. Do you frequently ask your students and/or employees what their thoughts and feelings are? Effective communication also utilizes responsive listening. Each person takes responsibility for what they hear. They check the meaning, content, and intent of what the other person says. Do you encourage your students/employees to ask questions as they arise? If you are describing a swinging leg lameness, and your listener is asked to hold all questions, you may lose them when the first question pops into their head. Information given beyond this question point often does not sink in, since the listener needs the question answered to understand. As you continue your lameness explanation, the listener is now thinking about other things, and may even forget their question. Another component of effective communication is feedback. Each person involved tells the other what they think they are hearing. Double checking to be sure of what you thought you heard eliminates many faulty assumptions. Don't assume that because you explained two point position that your student comprehends. Ask your student to tell you in their own words what you have just finished explaining. Effective communication is not stressful. If you are concerned that you aren't communicating, then the communication is not functioning properly. Effective communication is direct and clear. Mixed and contradictory messages confuse the content. Be honest about when you are confused or believe you are hearing a mixed message. Invite your students/employees to be honest about this also. The sender can then attempt to clarify the message.

There are many barriers to good communication. These include: distractions, interruptions, personal problems, personal biases, physical condition, psychological, hot buttons, culture, education, language, geography and more. Most miscommunication is the result of poor

listening, not poor articulation. Think about a recent conversation you had with someone. How could you tell if they were or weren't listening to you? What did you do? Did you ask them what they heard you say? On the other hand, think of a recent conversation when you started to drift off, or you realized you hadn't heard a word the other person just said. Did you take responsibility for it, apologize, and ask the other person to repeat themselves?

Following these steps will contribute to communication success.

- 1) Tune in to the present moment. Give your student or employee center stage when you are speaking with them. If you are preoccupied with other things, you are not present.
- 2) Be involved. Ask questions, show interest and concern. Invite questions. Give generously. Restate what you have heard as a listening check. Invite your students and employees to do the same.
- 3) Listen with your whole body. Use open body language. Your body signals to others how you are feeling. Give auditory and visual cues. Make eye contact. Smile.
- 4) Check your hot buttons. Don't get defensive. Avoid absolutes.
- 5) Control distractions. If you are teaching, make sure your lessons aren't interrupted by your employees coming to ask questions. No one is satisfied when this happens. Let your help know that they can come to you for certain priority situations only during a lesson. Give them a notebook to write down other questions and ideas, and set aside time to communicate directly with them also.

You will find that with practice your listening and communication skills will improve. Like any new skill, it takes awareness, effort and time. Your reward will be improved relationships with your students and employees. You will also stand out from the crowd since most people are not proficient in this area.

#### FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

##### Rule #1

If we don't take care of the customer...  
Somebody else will.

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

## Building a Marketing Plan

**M**arketing plans, business plans ... Understanding the difference between these two “animals” sets the stage for the effective use of both. As a horse business owner or manager, you are the most important resource your business has. Your focus is broad-range. This means that you have long-range goals, and short term objectives to reach those goals. You have so many irons in the fire, you often aren't sure which one you should be tending. Preparing a business plan helps you to structure and prioritize your business. It provides you with general guidelines for operation. A marketing plan then becomes your “implementation plan”. Resources for preparing a business plan and a marketing plan are found on the last page of this newsletter.

Many businesses have no formal business or marketing plan. Reasons frequently given for not having these plans are that the owner/manager is too busy coping with daily survival, that the market changes too quickly, and that they are only paper and are too hard to implement. It is smart to avoid a plan that is just paperwork. It is also true that in a very small organization, the business purpose (mission) may be so narrow that a detailed plan is excessive. For example, a freelance riding instructor could put together a plan that only requires a eight hours of thought, research and writing. An entrepreneur opening a boarding stable may spend an entire week or more doing research and constructing a plan that is 20-30 pages in length. Many new organizations, however, find a plan valuable because they lack history and their options are so wide. A plan aids in choosing wisely between alternatives. Do you want to offer boarding and instruction, or just one or the other? Will you be the only instructor/trainer on the premises, or will you let boarders bring in someone else? Often an owner/manager believes they have an internalized plan in their head, but usually are just kidding themselves. Many owner/managers don't know what their cash position is, find themselves undercapitalized, and having cash shortages. It turns out that it is much cheaper to sit at a desk and do some concrete planning than it is to lose business. A plan provides the basis for resource

allocation and marketing performance evaluation. How much money will you spend promoting your new adult summer riding program; what avenues will you use to publicize it; how will you tell the degree of success your plan had? A plan also helps your business anticipate change and generate questions requiring research. Does it look like there is a move towards requiring stables or instructors to be licensed? The planning process can also identify major uncertainties so contingency scenarios can be considered. What if someone buys the farm next door and also opens a riding stable?

Grow to your business potential by following these steps that provide you with the key ingredients of a marketing plan.

- 1) **Do a SWOT analysis.** This is a detailed description: internally of your product/services strengths and weaknesses; externally of opportunities and threats.
- 2) **Know what your competitive advantage is.** This means you will have a thorough understanding of who your competitors are, what they offer and at what prices, their strengths and weaknesses, and where you fall in the market.
- 3) **Research your marketing options.** This means yellow pages, trade publications, direct mail, internet, show sponsorships, directories, local newspapers, television, radio, video tape, t-shirts, brochures, business cards, trade fairs, telemarketing, etc. Find out how many people you will reach with any given method.
- 4) **Know your market intimately.** Who wants your product/service and why? How old are they? What income bracket are they in? What is their lifestyle like? How can they be reached?
- 5) **Be consistent with your marketing message,** image, and logo. You might get bored with it, but your prospects and clients will recognize you quickly and easily. They don't get bored with it.
- 6) **Put together an annual calendar.** This lists each service, product, or program and how it will be promoted that week. It also shows how much will be spent for that promotion that week. Track your results. How many responses did you get the first week? The second? Throughout the promotion? What kind of response did you expect?

- 7) **Continue to track your marketing effectiveness throughout the year.** Always ask how people have heard of you. Code your brochures and coupons. Get counts on visitors to your Web site.

#### RESOURCES

**Starting a Business and Running a Small Business** are both new publications available from the US Small Business Administration. Send your name and address to Consumer Information Center, Dept. 71, Pueblo, Colorado 81009.

**Nolo News** is a self-help catalog that provides "legal and consumer information for everyone". They carry a variety of business and workplace references and software covering starting and running small business, employer's legal handbooks, marketing, and tax information. For information write to Nolo Press, 950 Parker Street, Berkeley, CA 94710.

Business Resource Software, Inc. sells **Quick Insight** (market analysis), **Plan Write for Business**, and **Plan Write for Marketing**. These products are very good. Contact them at (800) 423-1228, or 2013 Wells Branch Parkway Suite 305, Austin, TX 78728.

**Guerilla Marketing and Guerilla Marketing Attack**, by Jay Conrad Levinson, are great reading. They offer great information that is easy to understand and easy to use.

#### **BLUE RIBBON BUSINESS**

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The SBDC, **Small Business Development Center**, will help you with marketing and other small business development problems. **SCORE**, Service Corps of Retired Executives, can also help with advice and networking information. They can be found in the business listings of your phone book.

#### CONSULTANT'S CORNER

All businesses encounter issues and obstacles as they grow. Take this opportunity to ask a question that's been on your mind for awhile. Send a brief description of your business, size, how long you've been in business, and your question to: Lisa Derby Oden, Blue Ribbon Consulting, 273 Poor Farm Road, New Ipswich, NH 03071. Include your phone number, as you will be contacted for any additional information. Your business name and details will remain confidential.

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