Communicating from the Outside In: Adapting Your Style for Your Purpose and Audience

WRITTEN BY:

Susan Letterman White, J.D., M.S.O.D.

PRESENTER:

Susan Letterman White:Susan@MassLomap.org

March 8, 2018

Lawyers are in the business of selling their ideas. They sell prospective clients on the idea to hire them and clients on the idea to heed their advice. They sell colleagues on ideas for running the business and working together. Selling tends to be easier and more successful when we sell to people, who like and trust us. If you want to be liked and trusted, you may need to adjust not just what you say but also how you communicate.

Initial impressions matter; however, whether someone will decide to like, trust, and be sold on your idea depends on your communication style. A style that is effectively sells your idea to one person may not be as effective on the next person.

Initial Impressions and General Rules

Generally, people tend to like and trust people, they perceive as attractive and trustworthy. But, what makes someone decide that someone else is attractive and trustworthy? Often, it's a matter of first impression.

In a formal presentation, before you say anything, standing up straight with head tilted slightly upwards and arms akimbo generally will be perceived as an indicator of your attractiveness and trustworthiness, as will be limiting prolonged, direct eye contact. People tend to conclude that someone is less trustworthy if they appear fatigued, impulsive, cross their arms, lean away, or touch their faces or hands. Body language does, indeed, communicate likeability and trust more than words.

Also, people tend to like and trust other people they think are like them. One way to create similarity is to adjust your communication style to fit with another person's expectations.

Flexing Your Communication Style

Prospective clients often require more than a first impression before they decide to hire a lawyer. Your colleagues will form an impression of how trustworthy you are over a period of repeated interactions. Create a positive continuing impression with a fit between your communication style and theirs.

Your default communication style will show itself when you are feeling rushed, tired, or under stress and not thinking about how others are perceiving and responding to you. Discover your default style through self-assessment and feedback from others and by paying attention to how you communicate – your appearance, language used, tone of voice, and body language – and how others respond – their appearance, language used, tone of voice, and body language.

The rest of the column is a short overview of the Social Style® Model assessment tool, a few questions to think about your style, and an explanation of the SPIN® selling model. It is followed with tips on how your preferred style can get you into trouble and flexing to your prospective client's style can lead to successfully selling your ideas to colleagues and services to prospects.

The Social Style® Model

The Social Style® Model sorts different communication styles into four types: Analytical, Driving, Amiable, and Expressive.

- A person with an **Analytical** style mostly speaks at a slower pace asking questions and is detailed, serious, and formal. The style is oriented toward thinking, avoiding emotions and conflict, and being right.
- A person with a **Driving** style mostly speaks at a faster pace making statements and is outcome-focused, serious, and formal. The style is oriented toward goals and actions, avoiding emotions, and controlling.
- A person with an **Amiable** style mostly speaks at a slower pace asking questions and is relationship-focused, casual, and informal. The style is oriented toward maintaining personal security, displaying emotions, and accommodating others.
- A person with an **Expressive** style mostly speaks at a faster pace making statements and is big-picture-focused, casual, and informal. The style is oriented toward seeking personal approval, displaying emotions, and being confrontational.

This model is not intended to prove that all people fall neatly into one of the four categories. Rather, its value is in bringing to your attention different communication behaviors that you may rely on a little too much and that some people may respond to a little too unfavorably. Knowing your tendencies gives you an idea of the behaviors you may need to adjust to flex toward others and transform a client into a loyal client and a colleague into a collaboration partner.

Acting like a third-party objective observer of your own behaviors and paying attention to how others respond gives you clues of how to adjust your communication style. For example, you should know if you are a faster or slower-paced communicator and what the person you are speaking with prefers to hear. Take a minute and consider the following:

- Are you more formal or casual in your appearance and communication style?
- Do you talk a lot or a little?
- Do you more often ask questions or make statements?

- How much emotion do you display?
- Do you tend to focus on the task or the relationship first?
- Do you talk more about the outcomes, details, big-picture, or relationship?

Think about a conversation with a client or colleague that was easy. What did you do that the person responded to favorably? Then, imagine a person with a style that is the opposite of yours. What behavior changes would make communication with that person easier?

The SPIN® Selling Model

Convincing people to spend their money on legal services, requires more than a good idea delivered by a likeable and trustworthy lawyer. Prospective clients must feel the consequences of a specific problem strongly and believe that they will be in a markedly different and better situation when they become your client. The **SPIN Model** guides sales-related conversations. The model outlines a list of question types to move a conversation from an initial introduction to getting the prospect to tell you what they need and believe that you can help.

The model begins with **Situation** questions to establish a context leading to **Problem** questions so that the prospective client reveals implied needs. When you have a sense of a prospect's implied needs, you can deepen the client's feeling of an acute and urgent need with **Implication** questions. When the prospect is acutely and clearly aware of an urgent problem and the implications of not addressing it, **Need-Payoff** questions nudge the prospect to state an explicit need - what will be different and better if the problem is addressed. Once the prospect has done this, you can explain the benefits of what you are selling and how it will lead to a situation that is different and better for the prospect.

Superimpose communication styles on the SPIN model. If you are speaking with an impatient Driver or Expressive, don't spend a lot of time on Situation questions. In contrast, if you are speaking with an Amiable, be certain that you have spent enough time on relationship-development before moving to Problem questions. Ask sufficient Situation and Problem questions to enable the detail-driven, emotion and conflict-avoidant, Analytical to logically analyze their problem and tell you how you can help them.

Conclusion

Adapting your communication style to the person you are calling to action should take into account different styles and preferences and involve noticing and listening as much, if not more, than talking. Selling a colleague on your great idea or transitioning a prospect into a client, a client into a loyal client, and a loyal client into a referral source, is easier with an awareness of your style and flexing it to fit with theirs.