

Understanding Your Audience

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Preaching matters. But I'm struck by a comment someone once made to me. "My denomination has many great preachers but few great communicators," he said. There's a difference.

A story might help us unpack what that difference is.

Some years ago I heard the story of a missionary named Ben Staggs who visited an isolated Ethiopian tribe called the Me'en people. When Ben and his team arrived they were welcomed by a Me'en leader named Golon Kabule. Ben describes the meeting going like this:

"We sat down and spoke a bit, explaining that we had come to tell them of 'God's talk'. I described who God is, what He is like, and where He lives." But Golon didn't need informing. He suddenly said, "We must follow Christosi [the Me'en word for Christ]." Astonished, as Christ's name hadn't been mentioned, Ben asked Golon where he'd heard that name. Golon explained that Christ had appeared to him in a dream, told him that it was he who had given Golon his life, blood and bones, and that Golon was to follow him. Christ then said that in just five days someone would come to tell him about following that path. Ben and his team arrived on the fifth day after the dream.

To the Jews Jesus came as the Promised Messiah from the Line of David. To the Me'en he comes as Christosi, the giver of "life, blood and bones". Like him, great communicators enter the world of their audience, learn their language and longings, and craft messages that resonate.

And that means we need to understand our audience.

After twenty-five years of writing, speaking and broadcasting I'm convinced this is the key to good communication, and one of the most difficult tasks.

Tools to understand your audience

The faces you see this Sunday are each a universe in themselves.

Each one of us is a world of thoughts, feelings, memories, and beliefs; of hopes, heartbreaks, disappointments, dreams; of risks taken and moments seized; of joys, longings, failures, victories. Each of us has been shaped by a unique combination of people, places, choices, and crises. All that means no one tool is going to exhaust our understanding of our audience.

Tool: demographics

- Age (compare the aspirations of a 15 y.o. with their world-weary parents)
- Sex and Gender (speaking to a women's conference is different to a men's event)
- Family and household (single, married, kids)
- Education (about shared language vs intelligence)
- Occupation (engineers vs artists)
- Income (well-off vs just-scraping-by, loan stress, work stress)
- Race and Ethnicity
- Religious affiliation
- Geography/Geodemographics (the London urbanite vs the Yorkshire farmer)

Tool: psychographics

Behavioural. Shows what a person cares about.

- Activities (what workdays and weekends look like, Media consumption)
- Interests (hobbies, sports, where spare time goes)
- Opinions (political, social, their driving values)

Tool: cultural communities

A culture is a group's personality. Involves shared language, beliefs, myths, values, customs, rituals and symbols.

- Can be based on religion and ethnicity, like Islamic and Hindu cultures
- Alternative spiritualities: new agers in Glastonbury, Findhorn in Scotland
- Hobbies can become cultures, like Cornwall's surfing community
- Christian cultures: New Wine vs Keswick vs Greenbelt
- Compare Paul's sermons to the Jews of Antioch (Acts 13:13-43) with the Greeks of Athens (Acts 17:16-33)

Tool: generations

Some tools combine aspects of both demographics and psychographics with key shaping forces for different generations.

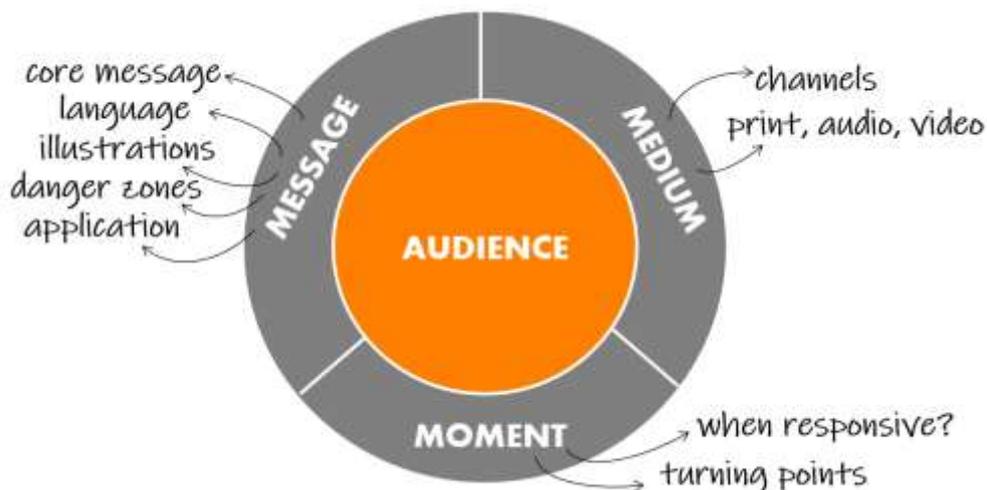
- Boomers (1946-1964. Shaped by post-WWII optimism, traditional media)
- Gen X (1965-1980). Shaped by high divorce rates, postmodernism)
- Gen Y/Millennials (1980-1995. Shaped by 90's recession, rise of internet)
- Gen Z (1995-2012. Shaped by smartphones, social media)

Tool: Heart

- Shaping stories (family, immigration, divorce, loss, successes, failures)
- Longings (meaning, guidance, liberation, love)
- Spiritual responsiveness (Matthew 13:1-23: Four soils: hard, shallow, contested, deep)
- Are they opposed, nominal, seeking or committed?

How does this help?

Knowing your audience helps shape your communication strategy. This is a model I often use when teaching about communication:



The audience shapes the three elements of message, medium and moment.

Message

- Your core message (single sentence/tweet)
- Language used (e.g. life, blood, bones)
- Illustrations, metaphors, stories, cultural references
- Helps you be aware of potential triggers and danger zones
- Helps you apply the message more sharply

Medium

- Are you reaching a Boomer listening to Classic FM or a Millennial on TickTock?
- Shapes how and whether you use print, audio, video
- Use of endorsers etc

Moment

- When will your audience be most responsive?
- There's a reason you see KFC ads in the evening, not morning
- Allan Hirsch reaching clubbing community: Sun am was no good as they were sleeping in!
- Reaching people at life's turning points when they're looking for guidance

Case studies

| Title | Audience | Message | Medium and moment | Comments |
|--------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| Book: Unseen Footprints | Written for spiritual interested 20-40 year olds Postmodern, reading Oprah, Deepak Chopra not scripture | Could God be involved in our lives like a secondary character that we haven't paid much attention to? Use of story, image, metaphor, invitational tone | Book, audiobook Sold in new age bookstores too | Fifteen years and four editions later, it's brought some readers to faith. Some Christians haven't understood it though. American Amazon review: <i>His theology is weak. ... Most (if not all) scripture referenced in his book is paraphrased or merely a reference to biblical passages as told in Voysey's own words. No real scripture...</i> Try and speak to the people of Athens and people can wonder why you aren't speaking the language of Antioch. |
| Radio show: Open House | Primary: 25-50 year old 'spiritual-but-not-religious' Australians Secondary: 25-50 year old Australian Christians | Life, faith and culture Aimed to catalyse spiritual life and motivate Christian action Missional, Credible, Holistic, Hospitable | Radio, podcasts | |

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| Event: FertilityFest | <p>“The world’s first arts festival dedicated to fertility, infertility, the science of making babies and modern families”</p> <p>Researchers, poets, writers, film makers, choreographers</p> <p>I was invited twice, the second time giving the closing keynote</p> | <p>What age do you think the majority were?</p> <p>How would you imagine them spiritually?</p> <p>What was the longing in their heart? (“I see nothing worthwhile ahead”)</p> | | <p>First year: shared the Sermon on the Mount</p> <p>Second year: shared Psalm 139</p> <p>Woman in tears. “What was that bit about being fearfully and wonderfully made again?”</p> |
| Radio 2’s Pause for Thought | <p>What do you think the age demographics are?</p> <p>How would you imagine them spiritually?</p> | <p>Assume you and the listener are not on the same page</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid all hints of ‘preachiness’ • Don’t tell the listener what to do • Offer discoveries rather than lessons • Own all truth claims <p>Be careful of repetition and floweriness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge the ‘other side’ of faith • What about when prayer doesn’t get answered? • How else could supernatural be understood? <p>But resist the subtle pressure to secularise or conflate</p> | <p>Zoe Ball Breakfast Show: 9 million listeners (station: 14 million a week)</p> <p>Pause for Thought: a multi-faith, inspirational God spot</p> <p>In the context of a bright entertainment-based show</p> <p>With tight compliance issues: a ‘non-contestable’ spot, no right of reply; not a platform for ‘proselytising’</p> | |

Conclusion

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev once baffled foreign journalists at a press conference by saying, “*Don’t hang noodles on my ears*”. It was a common Russian saying that meant *Don’t try to fool me*. The press didn’t get that.

I wonder how much of our preaching ends that way. We think we’re offering profound thoughts on God, and people are only hearing “noodles”.

Our Lord is the great communicator. To the Jew he comes as the promised Son of David, to an Ethiopian tribal leader he comes as the giver of life, blood and bones.

Let’s do the same.