

Bar communications

Communicating with a changing audience—or audiences

By Kimberly Vann

Does your communication style change based on whether the message is spoken, written, or sent electronically? When developing messages for your bar's members or the general public, do you consider your audience—their ages, their personal experiences, and their expectations? How can these variables affect how your message is presented and received?

W. Mark Lanier, founder and lead litigation counsel of The Lanier Law Firm, addressed these aspects of communication in a session at the National Association of Bar Executives Communications Section Workshop held in Austin, Texas, this past October. Lanier, a Houston-based attorney, is known nationwide for stunning courtroom victories including a \$417 million settlement in a business fraud case, *Rubicon v. Amoco*; a \$115.6 million asbestos verdict in *Aaron v. Carborundum*; and a \$253.4 million verdict in the initial trial against Vioxx.

He began his lecture with a humorous version of Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'" and continued by providing tips on how to "prevent a message from becoming a *massage*." Knowing how one's audience thinks is a key first step in developing a winning message, Lanier noted. "We assume people are thinking what we're thinking," he explained. "We need to know what the audience thinks, so we can bring them to our side." He encouraged audience members to make their messages understandable, acceptable, persuasive, and memorable.

How a message is delivered also requires thoughtful consideration, Lanier advised. If it is an oral presentation, the speaker's appearance and physical expression contribute greatly to his or her credibility. "Present with confidence," Lanier said. "Use your voice, body language, and hand motions to convey your message." Clothes matter, too, he added: Recalling a previous trial, Lanier mentioned how a female witness's conservative attire made her testimony sound more believable to jurors.

Perceived intelligence is another credibility builder, and a speaker's ability to memorize and recount facts is helpful. Lanier, who once considered becoming a minister and currently teaches a class in biblical literacy, shared that a seminarian told him that memorizing and quoting considerable passages of biblical scripture would impress congregants. "The audience must believe the speaker is intelligent," he noted.

The medium matters

Lanier identified three media of communication—oral, written, and electronic—and then provided insight on how to reach the audience, depending on the desired medium. Oral presentations require vocal reflection and memory devices, such as repetition, especially if the speaker is discussing new concepts. Lanier said Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech was not only voted the No. 1 speech of the 20th century in a nationwide survey of 137 communication scholars, but was a perfect example of how repetition made a message memorable. He quoted portions of the famous oration to illustrate his point.

Written presentations should be well organized and supported with evidence, he said. Lanier also recommended incorporating visual images when discussing abstract thoughts. "Introduce new ideas by tying it to something familiar," he advised.

Electronic media requires combining the best elements of oral and written communication, Lanier said. "Words are easier to think of, but easy to forget," Lanier said. "Pictures take more time to visualize, but are harder to forget."

Generational differences

Near the end of his presentation, Lanier divided potential audiences into generational groups—builders, boomers, busters, and bridgers—and then described each group's characteristics. The terms and dates Lanier used differ from those used by many other generational experts, but many of the characteristics will sound familiar if you've studied generational data before. Builders, also known as "the silent, private generation," were born between 1925 and 1945, are word-oriented, and can listen longer to oral presentations. Boomers, known as the "Me" generation, were born between 1946 and 1960, expect immediate gratification, and want communicators to make their point early in the presentation. Busters, born between 1961 and 1983, "were most likely latchkey kids while growing up, are cynical, like things plain and simple, and prefer informal communicators," Lanier said. Bridgers, born between 1984 and 2002, are called the "screen" generation because of their use of cell phones, laptop computers, and iPods. They are multitaskers and want a fun, humorous learning environment. They also expect to process and select from massive amounts of information.

Lanier emphasized his point by explaining how the level of information processing has escalated among generations through the decades. “In 1900, an 18-year-old processed 1,000 pieces of information every month,” he noted. “In 1960, an 18-year-old processed 1,000 pieces in a week. In 2008, an 18-year-old [processed] 1,000 pieces in an *hour*.” He amused the audience by recalling a conversation he had with his young daughter as she listened to her iPod, text-messaged a friend, then checked her e-mail at the same time.

Lanier concluded by saying that successful communication consists of “a good message and a good presentation to an audience that we understand.” Although Lanier chose a career as a civil trial lawyer instead of one in the ministry, he still captivated faithful members of NABE’s Communications Section with his timely message.