

# THE ART OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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# INTRODUCTION

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Communication is a serious business. Global business infrastructure is based upon people communicating clearly and effectively. Getting this wrong is relatively common yet, at key moments, it can have long term impacts.

Presentations have the power to change the world. The result of an important pitch has the potential to shape the future for hundreds if not thousands of people within a supply chain. Equally, a galvanizing presentation story shared with an internal audience can have long standing positive influence on an organisation.

Ultimately, any high stakes presentation places a huge amount of pressure on the presenter to get their message across loud and clear. This is particularly clear to see in the heady world of politics. In this article, we compare the communication styles of two politicians in particular. Personal politics aside, there are lessons to be learned from two very different political presenters, Gordon Brown and Donald Trump.

## WHEN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION FAILS

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When a high-ranking politician gets their message wrong, or reveals the wrong level of emotion, a country's economy can suffer. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown is a case in point.

Brown recently revealed on BBC Radio 4 that his inability to communicate was partly to blame for the UK economy going into austerity back in 2008...

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I FEEL THAT I MUST TAKE SOME RESPONSIBILITY FOR THAT HAPPENING. I FELT I HAD A PLAN, I FELT I KNEW WHAT TO DO, I FELT THAT I HAD THE RIGHT ANSWERS...

I WENT AROUND THE COUNTRY, I DID LOADS OF MEETINGS, I TALKED TO LOADS OF PEOPLE, BUT I DID NOT GET THE MESSAGE ACROSS.

GORDON BROWN

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Can you imagine the frustration Brown must have endured? He felt strongly and passionately about his plan, there was a problem on the horizon and he had a solution but when his 'moment of truth' arrived, he simply couldn't convey his message well enough to garner the support he needed.

This resonates with us here at Eyeful. We hear this story so often from clients - powerful, intelligent people with passionate views who, when it really matters, simply cannot get their message across consistently well enough to inspire their audience into following their call to action. Which is why they come to us.

In contrast to Brown, Donald Trump is a politician who used a series of well planned and executed communication techniques to successfully navigate his way into the White House.

So, where did Brown fail, how did Trump succeed and what can we learn from these politicians?

## IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S HOW YOU SAY IT...

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Brown's subject should have been highly emotive to his audience; after all, austerity has had a huge impact on everybody in the UK for the best part of a decade. But his dry and unemotive delivery style clearly didn't resonate with his audience.

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I DID FIND IT DIFFICULT TO COMMUNICATE IN A WAY THAT PEOPLE UNDERSTOOD JUST HOW STRONGLY I FELT ABOUT THE ISSUES... I FELT I SHOULD BE JUDGED ON WHAT I DID, NOT HOW I LOOKED...

GORDON BROWN

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BROWN IS AN ALMOST PATHOLOGICAL VERSION OF A CLOSED-OFF POLITICIAN... WITH HIS OLD-FASHIONED NOTION OF KEEPING HIS PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SELVES SEPARATE, WOULD COME ACROSS AS SOMEONE WHO IS ALWAYS HOLDING SOMETHING BACK...

DAVID RUNCIMAN,  
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY

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In contrast, Donald Trump's march to the White House was paved by a deep understanding of his audience, many of whom had grown tired of conventional political communication, and a delivery style which truly resonated with them. Inspiration can come from the most unlikely sources – in Trump's case from former WWE wrestler Jesse Ventura, who in 1998 had caused a major political upset by successfully running for Governor of Minnesota.

Before running for President, Trump visited Ventura to analyse and learn everything he could about the team's approach to public communication.

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PEOPLE DO NOT REMEMBER WHAT YOU SAY, THEY ONLY REMEMBER HOW YOU SAY IT.

DEAN BARLEY, CO-FOUNDER,  
MINNESOTA REFORM PARTY

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THE GREATEST CRIME OF ALL  
IN THE MODERN MEDIA AGE,  
IS BEING INAUTHENTIC.

RICHARD REEVES,  
DIRECTOR OF THE THINK TANK DEMOS  
AND A FORMER LABOUR POLICY ADVISER

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This age-old message merely serves to underline the long-held presentation wisdom - you can have the best idea in the world, but if the audience don't connect with you as a person and believe what you're saying, your chances of success are limited.

Engaging presenters who resonate with audiences are more than mere vessels of hyperbole - over exuberant delivery has an extremely limited lifespan. Being natural and finding the right balance of personality and confidence delivers the authenticity that truly captures the imagination of an audience.



# EMBRACING THE LATEST COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

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Delivering a formal presentation is simply one way to impart your message to an audience. Outside of the well documented issues of stage fright and technology glitches, there are a number of audience-based challenges to attend to. You rely on them to be in the right frame of mind, have the time to take in what you are saying and, of course, to turn up in the first place.

As a seasoned presenter, you should look beyond the 'traditional' presentation format and exploit the plethora of options that communication technology offers. This provides your audience with the opportunity to take your message onboard in the way they feel most comfortable.

Some prefer to watch a video, others to reference social media platforms and many people love to listen to a podcast while they travel. These are all valid ways to get your message across yet seemingly ignored by Brown.





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WE'VE GOT AN INTERNET AGE AND I WAS AT THE CUSP OF THIS AGE BETWEEN THE TELEVISION AND SOCIAL MEDIA AND I NEVER LEARNED... MY WIFE SARAH HAS GOT A MILLION FOLLOWERS ON TWITTER; I NEVER LEARNED HOW TO DO THIS AND I SHOULD HAVE... I'M NOT GOOD AT IT BECAUSE YOU'VE GOT TO BE ABLE TO COMMUNICATE IN THIS LANGUAGE... TELEVISION IS SIX SECOND SOUND BITES, YOU KNOW EIGHTEEN WORDS ONLY TO GET YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS...

GORDON BROWN

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To be fair, it is hard to imagine Gordon Brown on Twitter. But why? Is it because of his age?

We've already examined in this edition of Eyeful Insights the various generations involved in business today and it's true that Baby Boomers such as Brown would prefer to communicate face-to-face or by telephone. Of course, the lesson learned is that while Brown may not have related to social media, he needed to appreciate the fact that his audience did. The audience is always the most important stakeholder in any presentation.

Your audience aren't giving up their time to listen to you - they are there for themselves. They only want to hear how your great idea is going to make their world a better place...

This means if your audience will respond to key messages on Twitter, then this is certainly a route worth exploring...

Trump, notably older than Brown, recognised this and, with the help of his communication team, executed a perfect Twitter campaign aimed at his 45 million plus followers (in contrast Brown has just 45,000).

Of course, the suggestion isn't to start tweeting your key message if it isn't appropriate. However, do take a moment to think how you can share your message post-presentation through other formats to build further engagement and understanding from your audience.

The fact is, how you present your message isn't really up to you anymore. It's up to your audience.

# LESSONS LEARNED

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## START WITH A GREAT IDEA

Brown had, so he says, a plan to avoid austerity. If he could have communicated it more effectively, the UK might look quite different today. A valid and valuable message is a prerequisite for presentation success (the showmanship can follow later on).



## BE INSPIRED BY SUCCESS STORIES

Trump looked at those around him and took inspiration from the success of a wrestling star. He used this connection to learn about Ventura's approach and applied elements of it to his presidential campaign strategy. Don't be too proud to implement the strategies that have worked for colleagues, or even competitors.



## DELIVER NATURALLY

It's clear Brown struggled with this and it was a key factor in his failure to remain Prime Minister. On the other hand, like him or loathe him, Donald Trump was certainly able to connect with his audience naturally and deliver authentic communication.



## FLEX WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

Brown was criticised for not being able to deviate from a script and for delivering monotone speeches. It's vital to be able to deviate from the original plan and keep the conversation flowing if that's where the audience decide to go...



## SHARE YOUR MESSAGE ON YOUR AUDIENCE'S TERMS

Brown didn't use social media for campaigning at all, whereas Donald Trump used it as a platform to connect with his legion of followers on a daily basis. Remember, it's not up to you - share your message in the way that it will get most traction from your audience.

Follow this advice and you will not only be delivering like a presenter, you'll be presenting like a world leader...



## **PRESENTATIONS ARE TOO IMPORTANT TO NOT BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY**

Eyeful was founded in 2004 to address a problem that befalls organisations of all sizes – poor communication at key moments.

It might be a must-win pitch, a high stakes shareholder engagement or strategically important internal conference... whatever the event, presentations play an intrinsic part in their success or failure.

### **Optimising these engagements is where Eyeful step in.**

Understanding the fragile mix of elements that ensure presentation success is why, after all these years, we're still at the forefront of making communication work for clients across the globe.

The growing collection of Eyeful Insights papers is another example of this thought leadership in action. To learn more about our work, visit:

**[www.eyefulpresentations.com](http://www.eyefulpresentations.com)**