

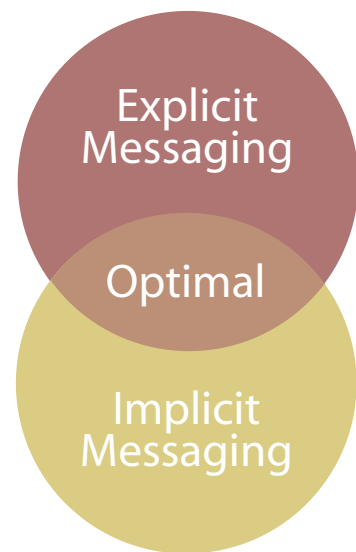
Dual Channel Communication

by Lauren Smith

Today, companies pour millions of dollars every year into putting their messages before the public trying to be noticed in a communication-saturated world. But often these messages don't resonate because it is not immediately clear who the company is or what it stands for. This may be because people are getting only half the message.

The most effective messages are transmitted on two simultaneous channels. The first, and most obvious, contains explicit communications—information in the form of words or graphics designed to inform or educate. Explicit messaging communicates on a cognitive level. Most companies do a good job transmitting on this channel. But just as important, and often neglected, is a second channel which contains implicit messaging. Implicit messaging communicates to people on an intuitive, emotional or psychological level. It is when the messages on these two channels work in concert that communication is most effective. Unfortunately, corporate communications rarely take full advantage of it. They often develop communications materials that do a good job communicating explicit messages but they are ultimately less effective because little consideration is given to the implicit messages. Or even worse, they confuse their readers by presenting implicit and explicit messages that are conflicting or out of sync.

Explicit messages are built from a vocabulary of facts, words, numbers, and visual symbols. Similarly, implicit messages draw from a rich vocabulary all their own—symbolic and cultural references, color and texture, and



style are but a few. In order to communicate effectively and consistently, a unique vocabulary must be defined, codified and applied to all corporate communications.

Companies that learn to synchronize these messages often enjoy great success. There are numerous examples of this but one that has always stood out for me is Starbucks. While the company's success must be attributed to a wide variety of factors, they have done an excellent job of creating a communications design system that communicates equally well explicitly and implicitly. Their communications are clear, focused and articulate while at the same time employing a rich visual vocabulary that distinguishes them and appeals emotionally to their target demographic. In fact, they've done such a good job that simply seeing a Starbucks bag or coffee cup with its distinctive graphics not only immediately identifies the source but evokes much of the corporate culture as well.

Apple Computer is another excellent example. Vastly different than Starbucks, Apple has created a context in which to communicate that is simple and elegant. It is every bit as effective but creates a completely unique image that underscores its cultural values. From the simplicity of the Apple logo to the sleek design of their products, everything the company shows to the public suggests innovation, elegance, confidence, and style.

For these and many other companies, creating a rich cultural environment in which to communicate their message has proven to be not only good communication but effective branding as well.

But perhaps the most important benefit of dual channel communication is its tendency to make the message “stick”. Why? Simply because people are much more likely to believe conclusions they’ve drawn for themselves over what is dictated by someone else. When an explicit message is “packaged” in implicit messages that prompt one to draw the right conclusions for oneself it makes a powerful and lasting impression.