



*Wedding
Interactive*

**Improving the Odds of
Successful
Communication**

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Wedding Interactive: Improving the Odds of Successful Communication

Good Evening.

First, I want to express thanks. I thank Heather Smith for extending the invitation to meet you all and since I am mindful of the cumulative experience and knowledge in this room, I want to thank you for this opportunity and for your interest.

There is an ancient Chinese proverb that states: Married couples who love each other tell each other a thousand things without talking.

And so often, it IS the unspoken details that create a memorable wedding as well.

From small & simple to elegant pageantry, weddings are such fabulous celebrations with that whole loud stew of confusion, optimism, and energy -- friends, families, generations, goodwill, hope, love, and new memories!

And, because marriage represents ritual and tradition, a rite of passage, ebb and flow, and life change. Because there are indeed so many people facing the unknown and doing things they've never done before.

Because expectations are high.

Because for many involved and invited, a new wedding stirs up old memories both fond and sad. And, because, for many brides, ideas they've carried around since childhood are about to become real.

There is... EMOTION!!

And it is the full spectrum and driving force - from happiness to enthusiasm to confusion to stress to utter immobilizing fear to dogged determination to occasional meltdowns! Save-the-date announcements, budgeting, deadlines, gift registries, extended families, pets, guest accommodations, websites, reaching out to families, rehearsal dinners and receptions - working with the people who make each wedding unique -- it is an awe inspiring task and bottom-line -- still - successful, memorable weddings spin on clear communication.

And, yet because weddings are jam-packed with human energy -- communication is predisposed to fail! You pull up at a fast food restaurant or Starbucks drive-through and you are greeted by a static-filled, but very hopeful, muffled voice, asking for your order. You lean toward the speaker, present your order with much optimism, often not sure how loud or soft you should be speaking, and then your order floats amongst the static, crackle, muffle, reverb, and traffic noise, including passing sirens, as it is confirmed - you're pretty sure they got it right and your pretty sure you know how much you owe when you pull up to the window!

But, That's it in a nutshell - it's the drive-through static, it's Charlie Brown's teacher, it's the essence of human communication - we want to express what we want, and we want to hear and understand each other, but we are in competition with the sensory overload of the world around us, let alone the din of our own internal dialogue. Mix in a little emotion, a little family dynamic, with the hopes and dreams of a couple about to be married and...

Well, as the communications scholar Wiio observes: Successful communication happens entirely by accident and anything that can be heard or understood will be heard or understood in the worst way possible!

So, how, as bridal consultants, do you improve the odds? You play many roles, from coach and hand-holder to stylist to negotiator to essentially business manager, since there is a part of each wedding that is actually a logistical business operation. You are essentially the "Mr. Spock of the Enterprise" - You are the



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logical processor, the conflict resolution specialist and facilitator who sifts through and sets aside human emotion to cut to the bottom-line, juggle the logistics, and deliver the vision.

You draw on techniques and knowledge and experience and intuition.

In martial arts, the success is in practicing and repeating techniques and a mindset until it all becomes entirely instinctive. What I would like to pass on tonight, are a few techniques, mindsets, and basic information on communications awareness that you can store in your resources toolbox....

Understanding communication just makes us better communicators in general, both personally and professionally. And, for compassionate professionals, simple awareness will automatically adjust the ears, we start to hear things differently and it is easier to "hear" between the lines. I recently read an article by a writer named Donnell King who made four observations about interpersonal communication:

Interpersonal communication is inescapable.

From what we wear to what we say to body language...
We can't not communicate.

Interpersonal communication is irreversible.

For better or worse.
Once it's said, it's in motion.

Remember on Friends, when Ross was marrying Emily in London, and said, "I Ross, take thee Rachel?"
Try as we might, we can't pull it back in. When it's said, it's said.
The ship's done sailed.
There are No "do-overs."

And, we tend to carry this need to respond or react in the moment, and we don't have to do that - we aren't characters in a movie where each clever quip or perfect retort is scripted -- there is everything right about taking a beat to respond in a thoughtful way.

Interpersonal communications is contextual.

Every single person in this room right now is hearing what I am saying in a different way.

Why? Because of context:

Psychological Context: What's goin' on inside your head right now? What is the internal dialogue? Who's going to win the super bowl on Sunday?

Relational Context: How are you relating and responding to me or the people around you?

Situational Context: We are in a banquet facility. But you could be in a classroom, someone's home, a restaurant, a church, your office, or Ohio Stadium. In essence, there's a set of behaviors and context for any venue.

Environmental Context: What is it like around you? Is that chair comfortable? Is the table too high, too low, or just right? It's what they call in film and tv production the "walla" that wall of sound and environment that accompanies a©
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Cultural Context: Things like eye contact and the personal space bubble. The learned behaviors and rules on interaction. It can be based on a myriad of factors like country, region, tradition, religion, family, workplace, friends, and society.

And, finally, interpersonal communication is complicated.

Wiio's Laws (which I listed in the information packet) are like the Murphy's Laws of Communication - they are maxims based on observation and experience and very much on human nature - and humans are flawed beings and communication is very complex and very layered and very fragile.

If anyone understood you today even in the simplest context, you succeeded!

Humans process information via dialogue. We also process information in very different ways - a client or service provider might respond by saying they "SEE" what you mean, or they "HEAR" you, some may "HAVE A FEELING" about what you are saying.

I read a helpful article recently that talked about the **hot burner rule** - as a way to illustrate how people learn. "Don't touch that, it's hot!"

To learn that, some people HEARD Mom tell them not to touch the hot burner and they've never done so. Some people WATCHED someone else touch the hot burner, saw the reaction, and they've never done so. And finally there is a third group who HAD to TOUCH the hot burner to see for themselves.... But hopefully they only had to touch the hot burner the one time!

Additionally, we can potentially hear about 300 words per minute. Audio books are about 160 words per minute because that's "hearing comfortably" and **the average conversation runs about 200 words per minute**. But as you can see there is a gap between hearing comfortably, really hearing and comprehending, and what we are capable of hearing.

Which leads me to **Active Listening**.

Now, Active listening is a technique I learned to draw on years ago in management training at Lazarus, and it still applies:

Active listening reflects the speaker.

- First, **be in the moment**. Try setting your ego and yourself aside and try not to think about what you are going to say next - focus totally on what the other person is saying. I read a great observation in a book on negotiation called *The Power of Nice* by Ron Shapiro (he's a sports agent) and his advice was first, never negotiate with a child, you'll lose every time and, next, take the "ego" out of negotiation to succeed.

One of my own personal touchstones is the phrase: *Check your ego at the door*.

- **Be involved in the actual conversation**. As I mentioned before, people can hear faster than people can speak, so it's easy to become distracted.

- **Always suspend judgment**. If there are 50 people in a room, there are 50 different perspectives in the room. Try to listen from the speaker's point of view, not from your own.

- **Listen to the entire conversation**. Try to avoid interruptions. It's a double-edged sword because as experienced listeners you know to be engaged in give-and-take dialogue. But, when it's your turn to speak, you want to speak interruption free as well, so lead and teach by your example.

- **Look at the speaker while you're listening**. This provides nonverbal feedback, which is as important as the verbal feedback. Nodding, smiling, shaking the head or frowning, nodding off to sleep (not recommended) are all feedback that the speaker actually needs.



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- Take notes, if at all possible. **Find the facts.** This helps you focus on what's being said, instead of what you'll be saying next.

Taking a breath before you respond, and then utilizing active listening by repeating what you understand the speaker just said to you is a valuable tool.

I utilize it daily, as I learn what my clients want, to clarify the details.

It is also a great way to diffuse a potentially volatile situation - **a deep breath before you respond, the repetition of the statement**, sometimes is the beat both parties need to step away from anger or a misunderstanding to avoid running into that irreversible aspect of interpersonal communication.

Responding instead of reacting gives you a chance to get to what really may be going on in a conversation. As you know, sometimes, what's really really being said isn't what's really being said. It's kind of like taking a technical support call - Is it turned on? Is it plugged in? What changed? What are the facts? What steps (actions) can you take to support the caller by solving the problem?

The first reaction or response to any statement, gives the statement its wings and its value.

And, just because someone floats a comment, we are not obligated to respond.

One of my favorite reminders is a quote attributed to *Abraham Lincoln: It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool. Then to speak and remove all doubt!*

As, I mentioned in my introduction, weddings are very much unknown territory for many and that is where **sense-making** can help --

We draw on everything we already know and use it to cross the bridge into new experiences. We use what we already know to.... make sense.

There are some valuable sense-making questions that you can apply to your business days and interactions. Heck, I even use them for myself, some of them are a great way to measure the day:

First,

- **How can I help you?**

Here is a little story one of my professors at OSU shared - during a study of library customer service, a man came into a library with his children in tow and by his clothing and his overall appearance, the librarian at the help desk surmised he was a farmer. She asked him what he was looking for and he responded, "I am looking for information about beans." So, she sent him to the agricultural book section of the library. A few minutes later, he was ready to leave, and on the way out, the customer service researchers asked him if he found what he wanted, and he responded "No." They asked him what he wanted and he said, "Information about beans." Then they asked him WHY he wanted the information about beans. He responded that he wanted to know how Mexican Jumping Beans worked, because his daughter had just gotten some and he wanted to answer her questions about how they jump! Ahhhhh, that's different, then!

So, asking HOW you can help someone helps you get to the bottom of what someone really wants.

Two more questions --

- **What helped?**
- **What hurt?**



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These seem like odd questions, on the surface, but if you can **wait through the silence** as the person prepares to respond, you get some very informative and revealing responses.

Finally,

- **Do you have any questions, concerns, or confusions?**
- **How did you get to this point?**
- **How does that make you feel?**

And, asking couples to reference **what they liked and disliked** about weddings they've attended or participated-in can also help both you and them "make sense."

One of the hardest things I've ever had to do, but it has become a valuable resource for me is to learn to do one thing - **Wait Through The Silences.**

As, I mentioned, we don't all process information at the same pace. So, sometimes, we wait....

I watch Gunsmoke in the mornings while I'm drinking the a.m. coffee and reading personal e-mails, and I've noticed Marshall Matt Dillon is the king of waiting through the silences!

Sometimes someone has a vision and is so excited about it or so overwhelmed in the moment that they may not be able to articulate what they see:

I find success with clients who have a vision, and may have trouble articulating what they want by asking a series of questions or even illustrating what I think they are telling me to find out what they DON'T want. The negative feedback helps them get to what they DO want.

You can also **utilize "Act As If"** - ask the client to visualize how they see their wedding day, for example, and talk to you out-loud or write out every detail they can think of, drawing on the 5 senses. How do your flowers smell? What colors do you see? What does your dress feel like? What music do you hear? Who do you see at your wedding?

I want to briefly touch base on electronic and technical communications options for weddings. In the information packet I provided, I listed just a few wedding features that involve communications.

And, with couples so familiar with **technology** today, they are really comfortable utilizing such outreach and information options as wedding websites and blogs.

I read a couple articles on 2007 wedding trends, and along with destination weddings in Italy, the wedding blog was listed as one of the hot trends. There are some really excellent websites for **personalized wedding websites and blogs** from free services through providers like the-knot to subscription services. I found even the payment-based services are very affordable and really nice. Putting together the details of a wedding website, I think, is also a great focusing tool for what a couple really does want for their wedding.

I have two "heads up" comments on utilizing the web, **e-mails, and blogs - they are a commitment.** And, whether the wedding couple decides to utilize the internet on their own or as part of your services or, let's say, communications consultant, or a designated friend or family member, online is great (I've heard many people comment how useful they found the wedding website, especially when traveling from out-of-state) but it is a commitment and something the couple cannot lose interest in. A lot of people will end up depending on the accuracy and timeliness of the information. **So, I guess I am saying intentions can be good, but expectations should be managed.** Additionally, the couple can continue their site as long as they wish, including the honeymoon, their first year, and into kids, pets and their lives together.



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One thing to keep in mind about tempering personal information on the web:

I was fortunate enough in the early days of the internet to come across a bit of perspective via a fabulous New Yorker cartoon. There are 2 dogs in an executive office. One dog is sitting in the chair (just like a dog sits) and that dog is at the computer, and another dog is sitting on the floor looking up with a bit of a quizzical expression. The dog at the computer looks at the other dog and says, "No one knows you're a dog on the internet."

It's a good illustration on realizing that **the web is a very public forum.**

And, second **when dealing with technology: Back it Up and Keep it Charged!**

Finally, I also included Thank You Tips in my information packet. Briefly, The internet is great for a lot of wedding conveniences, but **personalized, hand-written thank you's** are still the way to go and so important. Usually, wedding guests don't just pop into the mini-mart on the way to the wedding to pick up a gift since it's on the way! A lot of thought, effort, and nonverbal expression of care, and a chunk of change will go into a wedding gift. There is a lot to be said for the sensory experience of opening and reading a hand-written thank you - they are keepers. A thank you seems like such a simple thing, and the couple will be writing a lot of them! But they are delivered and opened one at a time, and they just make people feel good.

A couple can make thank you writing an event or a regular special time together and while the thank you itself should be handwritten - spreadsheets are perfect for logging gifts and givers and word processing software is perfect for drafting thank you notes that can be hand-written later.

Speaking of thank you's -- this brings me to the conclusion of my presentation, and I hope you will hear this in the best way possible - Thank you all very much!

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