Better Oral Communications
For Range Managers Series—No. 4

Talk to People, Not Audiences

Clayton B. Marlow

Public speakers will address many audiences, shaping their presentations to each. That is to say, they and you—the professional range manager—will talk to an audience, but must communicate with the people in it. To do that, you must speak to people as individuals, not as a group. If you are to create a favorable impression in their minds, your talk must be adjusted to what you perceive to be their interests and concerns.

As Frank Busby pointed out in the first paper of this series, you must talk to the average members of the audience while trying to pick up the below-average ones at some points in the speech and challenging those above average at others. Knowledge of your audience’s background, training and experience is paramount in developing such a talk. To illustrate the point, consider giving a talk on burning as a sagebrush control method to (1) a Section meeting of the Society for Range Management, (2) a local chapter of the Audubon Society, and (3) the appropriations committee of a state legislature.

To the SRM members you might say: “Most western rangelands are covered with dense stands of sagebrush. Such cover is considered unproductive for livestock and game, and of little use as watersheds. A recent controlled burn we conducted has shown that burning coupled with reseeding can be both effective and economical in removing sagebrush while tripling livestock carrying capacity.”

As guest speaker at the Audubon Society meeting, you could begin with: “Sagebrush has increased on certain western rangelands. Increased shrub density has little value for game forage or as a watershed. Mechanical control such as plowing or chopping can expose soils to increased erosion, while chemical control may leave toxic residues in soils, plants, and animals. Controlled burning, a relatively low-cost technique, employs a natural component of the ecosystem with a very short-term impact on plants and animals. Removal of dense sagebrush stands, followed by reseeding, can increase production of animal forage.”

At a legislative appropriations hearing you could state: “High density stands of undesirable shrubs on the state’s livestock and wildlife ranges are counter-productive to animal management programs. While mechanical and chemical treatments have been effective in shrub control, inflation and governmental regulation have made both expensive and difficult to use. Controlled burning and reseeding have been found to be less costly in both environmental and economic parameters than either mechanical or chemical control methods.”

There, you’ve done it. You’ve presented the same message to three different audiences, but tailored it each time to their interests and concerns. As a result, each talk had a different orientation, yet each was presented in such a manner as to convey equivalent messages. All three groups should now understand that controlled burning removes undesirable shrubs at low cost, without hazardous impacts on the local ecosystem, while improving animal carrying capacity. You have tried to talk to people at the leave of their interest, which may or may not be your level. While none of us can be all things to all people, we can improve our ability to make ourselves understood in this way.

It takes time and effort, but public speakers must cultivate the habit of speaking to people, not audiences. There are a variety of means by which this can be done, but the steps remain the same: (1) learn as much as possible about the group, (2) know what their objectives are, and (3) know what they consider to be critical issues. Then cast your talk against that background. This may require you to compose or alter the organization of the speech, its length, its method of delivery, its level of detail, and even its vocabulary so as to retain their interest while presenting your message. Be prepared to be flexible in both what you say and how you say it—the hallmarks of effective oral communication.

The author is a reclamation specialist for the Tennessee Valley Authority, Western Operations, in Casper, Wyoming.