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## The Dance of the Four Veils

Excerpt from *Seeing through a Donor's Eyes: How to Make a Persuasive Case for Everything from Your Annual Drive to Your Planned Giving Program to Your Capital Campaign*

For the most part, nonprofit communications are boring. Not on purpose, mind you. Still, they are almost always uninteresting, my vast exposure to them suggests. And why? Because they swaddle themselves in one or more of the following interest-draining veils.

### Veil #1: They reject any mention of conflict.

Ditto: controversy. Ditto: uncomfortable truths. Ditto: "anything that might upset people."

Conflict and controversy are the essence of drama. Drama automatically engages and intrigues readers, because our brains are wired to respond to such stimuli. Drama moves people. Drama overcomes indifference and inertia. And indifference and inertia are your real enemies when you're trying to communicate, particularly when you're trying to fundraise.

An absence of drama leaves readers bored, cold, unmoved, indifferent.

Does your mission naturally lack drama? Doubtful. Many, maybe most, charitable missions are in some way a solution to a serious problem: teenagers in trouble, disappearing natural habitat, disease, ignorance, chronic poverty. Problems like these are inherently dramatic.

Bear in mind, too, that the problems you're attempting to solve are exactly what makes your agency seem relevant to donors, prospects, the media, and others. If you climb aboard "the Happy Talk Express" and avoid drama at all costs, your communications ring false and your organization seems less relevant.

### Veil #2: A tendency to prefer weak, bland words to bold, vivid words.

Consider headline verbs, for example.

Here's a collection of verbs plucked from headlines in the *Wall Street Journal*: mauled, devour, looms, spark, threaten, embrace, sputters, sowing, surge, reject, retools, blames, loses, clash, expand. What characterizes this collection of verbs? Vigor, sound, fury, sharp action. In sum: these verbs have impact.

Newspaper editors have a saying: The verb is the story. Surges? The trend is up. Collapses? The trend is down. Verbs are fireworks, motion, attitude.

Here's a collection of verbs, though, that I scoured from headlines in nonprofit newsletters: establishes, listed, use, unite, reach, give back, plan, unifies, build, sets, visits, shares, administer, awards, help, benefits.

What characterizes this collection of verbs? They are inconclusive (shares), weak (administer), loftier than need be (unifies), and flat (visits, as in visits an issue). In sum: no impact.

### Veil #3: Faint (if any) appreciation for the emotional basis behind all human response.

Instead of fear, anger, hope, and salvation, we are served extra helpings of pontification.

With modern MRI diagnostics, we can now watch the brain fire as it makes a decision. It fires first in the emotional seat, then the impulse routes through the rational seat. Imagine the rational part of your brain as a flunky armed with a rubber stamp that says, in formidable letters, APPROVED. The emotions decide what to do. The rational part of your brain seconds the decision: Approved.

The old thinking held that emotions and reasoning were opposites. They struggled for dominance. The well-informed thinking now knows that emotions initiate the decision, and the reasoning area of your brain struggles to keep up with a "Yes, dear."

### Veil #4: Jargon.

Allowing jargon into your case is a faux pas. It's a mildly disgusting habit, something you don't do in front of guests, like flossing at the dinner table.

Here's a United Way of my acquaintance explaining itself: "Our awareness and efforts now focus on community impact goals, and how we feed into that. *In other words* [my emphasis added], our work has become driven more by mission than by function. We need the multi-

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pronged approach to move public will, and there has been an exponential benefit of working more closely and in concert."

*In other words?* This writer needs help. *Real* "other words" would have said something obvious like, "We've changed the way we do things. We hope to get better results this way. Our first attempt was a big success."

Jargon is not public language. It's for specialists only. Words like "interdisciplinary," that bring to mind all sorts of positive connotations among educators, do not resonate the same way for the average person.

And the average person—not a specialist—is your target audience. When the University of Toronto raised a billion dollars recently, 112,819 people made gifts. It's safe to assume that very few were specialists conversant with academic jargon.

Here is another example of non-conversational writing:

XYZ University's strategic plan is designed to amplify the university's academic excellence. The result of a 13-month planning effort, the plan identifies strategies to enhance the university's work for students on three fronts:

- Reinterpreting the liberal arts skills of communication and critical thinking to take into account 21st-century challenges and opportunities
- Multiplying connections between students and faculty members by building on the faculty's record of original research and creativity
- Building on XYZ University's strong sense of community, locally and globally

What's wrong with this sort of writing? At least three things: (1) it's freighted with jargon, the kind of bureaucrat-ese only insiders understand; (2) it mentions no emotional goals; and (3) the donor is nowhere in sight. Here's a rewrite that covers the very same ground, but eliminates all the flaws:

"Within a decade, if all goes according to plan, XYZ University will emerge as the top school in its class, leaving behind our 'peer schools' of today. Admittedly, the plan is ambitious. And it won't be cheap: excellence in education at this level never is. But we will get there, thanks to your vision, your commitment, and your help."

There's no jargon. The donor is given all the credit in the last sentence. And what are the "emotional goals"? (I.e., goals that touch the heart of the target audience.) There are several: emerging as the top school in its class, leaving behind its peer schools, and pursuing an ambitious (as opposed to ordinary) plan. These are all things the alumni understand, appreciate, and want. How do I know? I've asked.

Final word goes to the brothers Heath, from their business bestseller, *Made to Stick*:

"Concrete language helps people, especially novices, understand new concepts. Abstraction is the luxury of the expert. What does 'concrete' mean? If you can examine something with your senses, it's concrete. A V8 engine is concrete. 'High-performance' is abstract. Most of the time, concreteness boils down to specific people doing specific things."

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Tom Ahern

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*Tom Ahern is recognized as one of North America's top authorities on nonprofit communications. He began presenting his top-rated Love Thy Reader workshops at fundraising conferences in 1999. He founded his consulting practice ([www.tomahern.com/news.php](http://www.tomahern.com/news.php)) in 1990. His firm specializes in capital campaign case statements, nonprofit communications audits, direct mail, and donor newsletters. His efforts have won three prestigious IABC Gold Quill awards, given each year to the best communications work worldwide.*