



## An Experiential Classroom Exercise to Improve Communication Effectiveness

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## **Abstract**

We present an experiential classroom exercise that helps marketing students learn one of the root causes of communication errors within marketing dyads. Combining knowledge from the fields of marketing, communication, and psychology, The Communication Exercise presents students with a list of words and phrases that are common substitutes for actual probability and time, respectively. The procedure illustrates bases for miscommunication and fosters discussion about avoiding and/or remedying misunderstandings. We discuss results from two versions of the exercise and suggest avenues for further research.

“But language is a treacherous thing, a most unsure vehicle, and it can seldom arrange descriptive words in such a way that they will not inflate the facts . . .”

Mark Twain - *Following the Equator*

As marketing scholars, we want our students to learn proper communication practices and how to avoid misunderstandings among organization colleagues and between the organization and its various stakeholders. All marketers are interested in achieving accuracy both within their organizations and in external communications. Unfortunately, as Mark Twain noted long ago, we face many adversities that stem from simple misinterpretations of the language we use.

We may be surprised by the differences in what we said and what our target audience *thought* we meant. Everyday, simple expressions can become unclear, leading to mistrust and potentially relationship-damaging circumstances. The following exchange from the motion picture, *10 Things I Hate About You*, illustrates the frustrating state of affairs:

Patrick Verona: Is that a yes?

Katarina Stratford: No.

Patrick Verona: Or is that a no?

Katarina Stratford: No.

In this article we describe a simple classroom communication exercise<sup>[1]</sup> that is designed to illustrate how some problematic everyday words lead to poor communication because of different meanings people attach to those words. The term “subjective probability” is commonly used to describe this subject area. For example, Bassett and Lumsdaine (2001) examined the accuracy of subjective assessments in health and retirement decisions, and Kardes et al. (2001) focused on consumer belief systems as expressed through subjective probability estimates.

Whereas most research focusing on subjective probability investigates specific belief systems, we focus on subjective probability itself and its role in communication effectiveness. The two areas of interest in this research are words related to probability and time. Learning about the use of such terms can help in formulating better training to improve communication effectiveness in organizations of all types.

In 1949, Shannon and Weaver’s linear model of communication introduced “noise” (anything that causes information to be lost as it flows from source to destination) to the understanding of interpersonal communication. Since then, communication models have become much more dynamic to represent the transactional nature of communication, and the understanding of “noise” has

expanded. Word choice can certainly be a source of noise that disrupts the intended creation of meaning. The circumstances where vague words can lead to undesirable consequences are as extensive as the number of settings where interpersonal communication takes place. Examples of research in specific areas include English (2002), who examines perception and miscommunication in the construction industry related to cultural issues; Milliman, Taylor and Czaplewski (2002), on miscommunication related to performance evaluations that could ultimately affect productivity; Knowles (1958), who describes such difficulties as a factor in collective bargaining; and the aforementioned Bassett and Lumsdaine (2001) and Kardes et al. (2001) studies.

The miscommunication described in these and many other studies can lead to lower productivity, poor motivation, loss of customers, and other adverse consequences for marketers. With the knowledge gained from participating in this exercise, students may be able to develop new approaches and/or methods of training to assure proper, more accurate communication. The exercise helps marketing educators answer the call for incorporating more knowledge and skills relating to communication, teamwork, and multifunctional teams (Gonzalez et al. 2004). Also, this exercise fits the recent classroom environment well, where marketing educators have been emphasizing active,

practical, and effective learning environments and exercises (Ducoffe and Tucker 2004; Gonzalez et al. 2004; Smith and Van Doren 2004).

**The Exercise, Open-Ended Response Version**

The exercise is simple to prepare and run. As shown in Exhibit 1, on the probability side, we announce the words one at a time and ask the participants to indicate a percentage to represent what that word means.

<i>Probability</i>	<i>Time</i>
_____ <u>Always</u>	_____ <u>ASAP</u>
_____ <u>Never</u>	_____ <u>Soon</u>
_____ <u>Probably</u>	_____ <u>Today</u>
_____ <u>Usually</u>	_____ <u>Tomorrow</u>
_____ <u>Often</u>	_____ <u>Right Away</u>

Exhibit 1

Communication Exercise

For instance, if you tell someone you “always” do something, does that mean 100% of the time or some percentage less than that? Students are instructed to record their idea of the actual probability meaning of each term as it is presented. On the time side, we also announce the words one at a time and ask the participants to indicate what they mean in terms of time (i.e. number of minutes, hours, days, etc.).

As necessary, we offer clarifying statements and respond to questions to help students understand the types of responses the exercise requires. However, in running this communication exercise, caution is important; some students may figure out the purpose of the exercise before we present the last term. If so, we instruct them to hold any comments or questions they may have until the end of the exercise, during the results discussion. We do this to avoid diminishing the experiential value for the other participants.

Once everyone has recorded a response to the terms, we begin recording the results. We record the highest number for the first term by asking for a starting value from a volunteer. We then work down to the lowest and/or up to the highest value, depending on which term is being recorded. For example, for *a/ways*, we start with a question, “Did anyone have 100%?” or “Does anyone say it’s 100?” In our experience,

the highest response for this term generally falls between 90 and 100. Other terms with higher probabilities include *usually* and *probably*.

Responses trend lower for *never*, so we start by asking if any participants had “zero” for this term, and then move on to those with responses above zero. For some participants this term does *not* connote zero percent. Record the highest and lowest response for each term on a whiteboard, flipchart, or a similar display to prepare for the results discussion.

Depending on the class in which the exercise is used, several marketing-related scenarios can be suggested and students asked what the likely results will mean. In the retail management course, for example, we have used a scenario of a special order being made and the customer calling about its status that works well. When told that such orders are “usually received within one week,” the customer assumes near 100% certainty that the order will be there one week later, and plans for a special trip of fifty miles to pick it up. However, the clerk who used the term “usually” meant a probability closer to 50%, knowing that such orders take one to two weeks and thinking that the customer would call again to confirm before making such a trip. Participants will often have their own examples from many different situations that make for a lively discussion. (A suggestive list of marketing examples appears in the Appendix.)

The other part of the communication exercise works in a similar fashion. Record the shortest amount of time, and the longest, for each term. Then use marketing-based scenarios to illustrate the potential for problems, and resulting anger, loss of business, and poor word of mouth. Miscommunication between a marketing manager and his or her subordinate works well for such commonly-used terms as *ASAP* and *right away*. We have found these terms to result in widely varying estimates of the time meant when they (and, to a lesser degree, the other time-based terms) are used in face-to-face or written communication, such as e-mail.

For example, one scenario we have used describes a marketing manager telling an assistant to produce an analysis of data for a research report “right away.” The subordinate assumes the marketing manager meant “the first chance you get to work on it.” The manager really meant “within the hour” because she has a meeting over lunch with the client. When asked just before lunch where the analysis is, the subordinate replies, “I was planning to finish it just after lunch.” Again, the obvious ramifications for the manager, subordinate, and the client can make for valuable class discussion.

The exercise is robust in illustrating how meanings vary among people; this is one of the values of the communication exercise. There are always (that is, *every time!*) large differences in the probabilities and time definitions between the high and low

responses of participants on at least two terms, even with small group sizes (we have run the exercise successfully in undergraduate, graduate, and even professional conferences with as few as 10 participants). Next, we describe a different format for presenting the communication exercise.

### **The Exercise, Scenario-Based Version**

In the class discussion following the open-response version of the communication exercise, several participants have commented that their answers would vary depending on the situation. In other words, their answers might be different in a different setting and/or with different people. Telling one's boss you will get to it ASAP will likely carry a different meaning than telling your spouse or friend. Heylighen and Dewaela (2002) claim that "language produced in different circumstances varies in its *degree* of context dependence" (p. 334). Therefore, we developed a second method of presenting the common terms at the center of the exercise; a scenario (see Exhibit 2) for the participants to read and base their responses on, in order to provide a uniform context for all participants. The scenario contained the same common probability and time terms as used in the open-response version.

After reading the following paragraph, answer the questions that follow

At 10:00am on Tuesday, Ann and Jay went to Hometown Bank to apply for a loan for a house they had made an offer on. They needed a \$125,000 loan to go with the \$50,000 they had saved. Although they told Robert, the loan officer, that they needed to close on Friday, they didn't tell him about the catch. The seller needed to close on Friday as she was being transferred out of the country. Since Ann and Jay's offer had been accepted, the seller had received another offer for \$165,000 cash. Thus, if Ann and Jay could not close on Friday, the house would close on Monday with the buyer who had cash in hand.

Robert assured Ann and Jay, "loans for people like you who have such a good down payment and decent credit are always approved." "I often talk with corporate headquarters; in fact," Robert continued, "We will probably know tomorrow." Ann said, "I am really excited about the house and want to make sure this goes smoothly." Robert replied, "We never have any problems in cases like this." "What about the money?" Jay interjected. "You will get that soon," Robert said. "Usually, the customer can have the cash right away once they have been approved." "Will you rush this along for us?" asked Ann. "I'll do it today," Robert assured them, "and then I'll call you ASAP after I have an answer. Ann and Jay left the bank to wait excitedly for Robert's call.

## Exhibit 2

### Communication Exercise Scenario

After reading the scenario, half of the participants were asked to put themselves in Robert's place, and state the probabilities and length of time they would use to define the communication terms. The other half were asked to put themselves in Jay and

Ann’s place and record what they thought Robert meant for each of the terms. (See Exhibit 3.)

Answer for these words in terms of probability (i.e., between 0 and 100%).	
Always	_____
Never	_____
Probably	_____
Usually	_____
Often	_____
Answer for these words in terms of time (i.e., # of minutes, hours, days, etc.).	
ASAP	_____
Soon	_____
Today	_____
Tomorrow	_____
Right Away	_____

Exhibit 3

Communication Exercise Scenario Response

In order to determine the robustness of the communication exercise, we collected data for the open-response version of the exercise (n = 108 students) and for the scenario-based version (n = 47). As the following tables show, for both subjective probability and

time, there were wide differences in respondent estimates for each version of the exercise.

Open-Ended Responses

Mean, Standard Deviation,  
and Highest and Lowest Response

	Probability					Time				Right Away (hours)
	Always	Never	Probably	Usually	Often	ASAP (days)	Soon (days)	Today (hours)	Tomorrow (days)	
Mean	85	24	65	68	66	.038	2.02	10.95	1.28	.57
S.D.	19.6	30.2	19.1	18.0	20.9	.86	6.05	7.29	.76	1.8
High	100	100	100	100	100	7.00	60.00	24.00	7.00	12.00
Low	0	0	10	7	15	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

n =108

Scenario-Based Responses

Mean, Standard Deviation,  
and Highest and Lowest Response\*

**Probability**

**Time**

	Always	Never	Probably	Usually	Often	ASAP (minutes)	Soon (days)	Today (hours)	Tomorrow (days)	Right Away (minutes)
Mean	93/93	12/9	55/58	71/62	55/58	64/50	3/3	10/10	1/1	37/29
S.D.	8/12	15/15	15/21	20/19	23/20	78/43	2/3	9/11	1/1	33/33
High	100/100	50/50	75/90	95/90	82/80	180/120	7/14	24/48	4/5	120/120
Low	65/50	0/0	10/5	2/25	2/15	1/5	0/0	0/2	1/1	1/1

\* For the scenario-based responses, the top number represents those responding for Robert, the bottom number those responding for Jay and Ann (n = 24 for Robert, n = 23 for Jay and Ann).

**Discussion**

While there are some differences between the results of the open-response version (i.e., the exercise without the scenario) and the results of the scenario-based version, there continues to be a significant range of answers that suggest a difference in understanding about the terms and their usage. In our first study the low for the term “always” was 0 percent. Whether that answer was from a very cynical person or someone who misunderstood the percentage range, the implication for confusion of the terms is still present. This is especially apparent in the terms “probably,” “usually,” and

“often.” The time terms are just as much prone to misunderstanding. Even the term “today” means “tomorrow” to some!

It does seem that different situations affect participants’ understanding of the terms. However, it affects individuals differently. In other words, while a different scenario may affect an individual’s use of the term, there remains a range in expectations by different participants within the same situation.

Clarifying meaning in common terms seems like an obvious way to increase shared meaning in both business and interpersonal settings, but these terms are so common that usage is often taken for granted. Exhibit 4 lists common lessons learned from the Communication Exercise. Discussing such a summary is a good way to bring closure for the students and reinforce the main purpose of the exercise.

#### **Lessons Learned\***

- For probability terms, use actual percentages or ranges.
- For time terms, use actual dates and times instead of these and other similar terms.
- Try to catch yourself and clarify your meaning.
- Be aware that some people use these terms purposefully.
- When others use these or similar terms, be sure to ask questions.
- Do not assume others have the same definitions for words and terms as you do.

\*This list is not meant to be comprehensive; rather it is representative of exercise results.

Exhibit 4

### Communication Exercise Wrap-Up

During the discussions that have followed the exercise, we have found that context may be a variable for the time estimates. Our scenario approach to this exercise was an attempt to minimize context effects and increase reliability and validity in the subject estimates for both the probability and time estimates. We plan to test several additional data collection methods to minimize even further the context effects and maximize reliability and validity in the subject estimates for both the probability and time estimates. Some additional variables we may want to pursue in further research include nationality and/or culture (as we found our international participants may have a different understanding of time), and years of true work experience (not just the part-time jobs young adults have held as they have completed their education). In order to follow up on the latter item, we may need to collect data in organizational settings outside of the convenience sample of college participants. In the meantime, we can continue to use this exercise as a teaching tool in classroom environments and in workplace training.

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## Appendix

### Marketing Scenarios for Discussion of Communication Exercise

Shelly, a salesperson for an office supply firm, tells a prospective buyer that she can “usually obtain an initial shipment quickly” of a new product. Shelly does this in order to obtain more time that will allow her to gather more information on whether she can obtain such a shipment, and thus not lose the sale on the spot.

Tim tells a subordinate he needs an updated report “today, for a meeting with the client.” The subordinate delivers the report after lunch, and then discovers that Tim’s meeting was with the client at a luncheon that just ended.

Pam, the new manager, and a former military officer, asks William for a financial report “ASAP.” The manager she replaced had used that exact term too, but everyone knew he had meant “in a day or two.” Within an hour of her initial request, Pam orders William into her office for an explanation.

After being told by a superior that new regulations affecting his division will take effect “soon,” Bill tells his staff they should plan on meeting in the next few months to begin planning for these changes. Within days, he is notified that the changes will be in place the next week.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Adapted from a training exercise used by the first author in the 1980s when he was a senior training specialist at Union Central Life Insurance Company in Cincinnati, Ohio.