

# Professional communication skills for vets; an essential tool for all!

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Communication plays a key role in our everyday professional life, with our colleagues, our clients as with our external partners. We usually deal with the different situations in the best manner we can using our character, our experience, and our natural instincts (including good and bad communication behaviour). However, a little awareness and technical know-how could avoid many misunderstandings and improve the efficiency of our message delivery in many circumstances.

Veterinarians, both private and public, are often considered not to be very efficient in promoting their profession, their societal value, or indeed promoting the value of the wide range of competencies in which they are involved. For example, the role of the vet in clinical practice is often defined in the public mind as solely treating sick animals. Who knows about our role in food safety, food security, public health, environment protection, animal welfare, animal production, etc? It should be a concern for each of us to value all the communication opportunities and

deliver a factual but positive message on all the aspects of the veterinary profession to varied audiences.

## THE MESSAGE

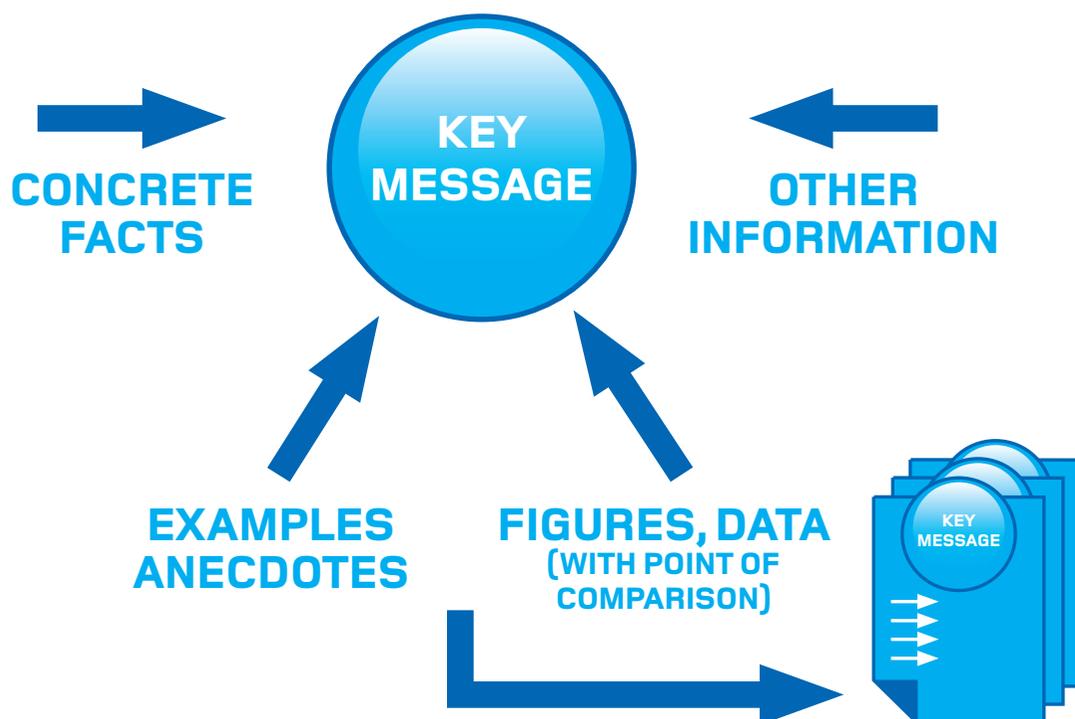
If there would be one essential idea to keep in mind about communication, it would be the following: What message do I intend to deliver? And, what do I want to achieve by delivering this message?

Be very clear with yourself with these questions. Write the message down. Discuss it with colleagues as far as necessary.

This approach is of crucial importance when giving an interview to the media, especially in a situation of crisis. Whatever the question is, I have to deliver and repeat my core message.

## INTERVIEW

If I have a message to deliver, I will say it as many times as necessary. I have to bear in mind that, at the end, the



journalist will keep only a few sentences - a few minutes of record - from this interview. This is why I have to repeat my key message throughout the interview, whatever the questions are. I am not obliged to answer to the questions directly! I am not!

Let's look at an example situation and pretend we are facing a rabies outbreak. The Veterinary Association wants to stress that dogs and cats should absolutely be vaccinated.

Journalist: "The situation is serious. What is the danger for human beings?"

Vet: "We have to stress that the first barrier to human contamination is the vaccination of dogs and cats. Every pet owner should have his/her animal vaccinated without delay to avoid any human case. Just go to your veterinarian and ask for this painless vaccination."

Journalist: "Can human beings be vaccinated to prevent contamination?"

Vet: "First of all, dogs and cats should be vaccinated, to prevent then for contaminating humans. Pet vaccination can be systematic and preventive, as indeed is human vaccination."

[Note: the information I give on human vaccination cannot be separated from the information I gave on pets' vaccination].

My answers to the same questions would not be the same if my concern would be, for example, that all the dogs that could have been in contact with the index case should be sought out, identified and brought to a veterinary practitioner.

Journalist: "The situation is serious. What is the danger for human beings?"

Vet: "The main concern is that every dog that could have been in contact with the rabid dog 'Shep' is found out and brought to a veterinary practice for an emergency visit. This is of crucial importance to avoid any human contamination or to prevent possible human contamination."

### USELESS DETAIL

We often complain that journalists always remember and use details of no interest out of our interview. Yes, but why did we give them such details?

Another trap is that, very often, I have so many concerns about my own image, I am so stressed about what people could think about me that I forget my real message.

Being clear with the message is also indispensable when giving a professional lecture or writing a document. We do not speak here about scientific and technical lessons and articles, when the audience objective is to learn, as is the case in most of the veterinary lectures or continuous education classes. We are rather speaking about presentations we can make to stakeholders, partners or clients.

First of all, I have to identify the key message – or the two key messages (not more) – to deliver. Then, all of the lecture (or note) should feed, directly or indirectly

into delivering this (these) message(s). Concrete facts, examples, anecdotes, figures, data, etc. will all point in the same direction towards embellishing that message. Therefore, I can repeat the same message with many different combination of words and approaches.

### TB IN MY COUNTY

The presentation of 'The epidemiological situation of Tuberculosis in my County' will be very different, although the title is the same, if I intend to outline either 1) the efficiency of the actions carried out by the Veterinary Services 2) To demonstrate that Veterinary Services need more financial resources or 3) To convince the audience about the need to regulate the badger population. One cannot efficiently deliver these three messages at the same time.

Quite often, the message will not be expressed directly. I will never say: "I intend to outline the efficiency of the veterinary services to fight Tuberculosis in this county". No. I will make a very factual and technical presentation (actions carried out, evolution of prevalence, partnerships, etc.) that will lead the audience to this obvious conclusion. Of course, they will not remember most of the information I gave, they will perhaps think that my presentation was too complex, but I have no concern about that complicated delivery, it was made on purpose, as my objective was to convince them of our efficiency to deal with this (difficult) situation.

The same mechanism, adapted, could be applicable to any other communication situation.

### KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

The message is targeted to a specific audience, whether it is the general public, a group of professionals, my colleagues in the office/practice or an individual person. I have an objective to reach and connect with these people (or, sometimes, not with them directly, but with the person who originally invited me).

The more I know about the people I am speaking to or writing for, the more relevant I will be in delivering my message. I have to try to understand the target audience concerns, their own needs, their own level of information on the subject and background. I have to deliver the information that is of interest for them and that they will comprehend (e.g. what services our veterinary practice can deliver, how can my message be relevant to them), not the information that is of importance to me (the chart of the veterinary association, its history, its new status).

### NEGATIVE OR POSITIVE WORDS AND MESSAGES?

Always use positive wording. The unconscious will pick the words themselves, not the negation.

'I will not lie' should be 'I will tell the truth'. On the one hand, the audience had heard 'lie', on the other hand 'truth'.

'Weak points' should be 'points to improve'.

Avoid understating words. 'A little idea', or 'a small

advice' should be 'an idea', 'advice'.

'Yes, but' really means 'no'.

Avoid acronyms, except if you are sure that everybody will understand them without any risk of confusion.

Avoid technical wording in front of non-informed audiences – except, very rarely, on purpose – to show how difficult the subject is. Use concrete examples; give an appropriate amount of relevant data, with points of comparison.

'We have a lot of interesting partnerships with many professional associations' means nothing. It should say: 'We have commercial and scientific partnerships with more than 20 professional associations such as

private human doctors, the food industry and farmers associations.'

'The prevalence is huge' would be better as 'the prevalence (or: 'the proportion of herds where a case or more have been identified') is almost 5%, the highest in all the EU - where the prevalence spans between 0.1 and 1% depending on the country.'

**RESPONSIBILITY**

Nobody else will promote the veterinary profession and its societal value if veterinarians themselves don't: we have a collective responsibility concerning our profession's image. Animal health, public health, zoonosis, food safety,

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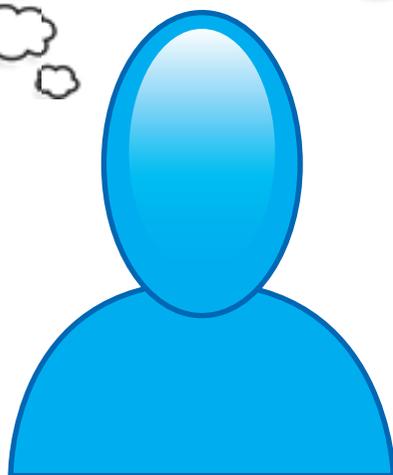
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food security, nutritional balance, 'from the farm to the fork', 'from the stable to the table', One Health – the wider the picture, the more valuable the profession. Always speak in humble terms but be positive in front of clients, partners, farmers, elected representatives, and administration. Adopt this approach even when you are

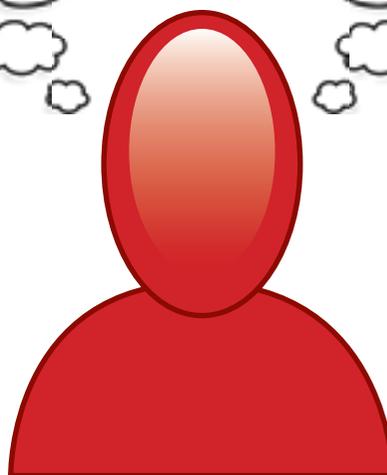
complaining or discussing challenging issues. Of course, if our key message is that the veterinary profession is useful to society, we will not say it directly. We have to show facts, demonstrate competencies and give explanations. That will help nourish and deliver our clear message by themselves.

## A DIALOGUE BETWEEN 2 PERSONS

### THE REPORTER



### YOURSELF



## Reader Questions and Answers

### 1. IF THERE WOULD BE ONE ESSENTIAL IDEA TO KEEP IN MIND ABOUT COMMUNICATION, IT WOULD BE:

- Know your audience
- Choose the method of communication first
- What message do I want to deliver
- Always use positive words

### 2. DURING AN INTERVIEW IT'S BEST TO:

- Repeat your core message a number of times
- State your core message only once
- Allude to your core message, but let the journalist figure it out
- Only answer what you are asked about

### 3. WHEN DELIVERING A MESSAGE TO A SPECIFIC AUDIENCE I SHOULD:

- Tell them what is relevant to them
- Tell them what is important to me

### 4. IT IS BEST TO USE:

- Positive words and vague examples
- Positive words and concrete examples
- Negative words and concrete examples
- Negative words and vague examples

ANSWERS: 1. C, 2. A, 3. A, 4.