

## **The Gift of Communication**

By Mary Crotty

[www.TheWordSlingers.com](http://www.TheWordSlingers.com)

The Irish say a person has the gift of gab. Others refer to it as being eloquent or having a silver tongue but no matter what you call it, **IT** is the ability to communicate with people and **IT** is truly a gift. After the recent presidential election, I started thinking about this gift, because clearly Barack Obama has it, and I wondered if it is a gift we are born with or one that can be developed.

### **Nature Versus Nurture**

There have been many gifted communicators throughout history but there is one from our current era that has dominated the airwaves and influenced thousands or even millions of people – it's none other than Oprah Winfrey. Oprah's current show has been on the air since 1986 and her longevity in the world of television, whose fads and trends change as quickly as the seasons, is a testament to her ability to communicate and to adapt her style to changing times.

In interviews, Oprah has said that she "began her broadcasting career" at the age of three performing for her family and by seventeen she had her foot in the broadcasting door at a local radio station in Nashville, Tennessee. Her rise to fame and fortune have been chronicled on countless magazine covers, television news shows and even E's True Hollywood Story and all clearly demonstrate that she was born with IT, this gift of communication.

At three, most of us were playing on our big wheels or watching Sesame Street, so does that mean that we don't have THE gift and if we weren't blessed with it at birth, are we out of luck? I don't think so. Of course it wouldn't hurt if your mother touched the Blarney Stone while she was pregnant with you but if she didn't, I still think most of us can learn how to be effective communicators. But like all skills, it requires time, patience and effort and the first step is figuring out what makes one person a gifted communicator and another not.

### **The Traits of a Gifted Communicator**

The recent election gives us a prime example to study. Many, regardless of their political affiliation, seem to agree at least on one thing - that Obama's victory was attributable to the country's declining economic climate and the hope that a change in leadership might bring about a turnaround. While I agree with that assertion, I don't think Obama won on that basis alone. Remember John Kerry in 2004? The country was tired of the war in Iraq and the economy was on the decline, although not to the extent it was in 2008 it was a decline all the same. So what was the difference? Kerry was intelligent and arguably more experienced than Obama. What he lacked was the ability to communicate at the level required of him. Neither his words nor his presentation style inspired confidence or the number of votes needed to win the election.

On the other hand, Obama possesses the traits that the most gifted of communicators have. Of course, he is a **charismatic speaker**. I doubt there are few who could deny that, even if they don't particularly like or agree with his message, but a truly gifted communicator isn't just a good speaker. They possess some other critical traits.

- **Organization:** Gifted communicators understand that the organization of their message is as important as the content itself. Obama's ability to use a consistent theme and message throughout his entire campaign was in clear contrast to his opponent and made a huge difference in the outcome of the election.

Now, imagine your competition and their business communications. Do they send a clear, consistent message in their words and in their actions? If not, you have a huge opportunity to gain the edge with customers by organizing your communications into consistent, branded messaging that clearly identifies you and the value you bring to prospective clients.

- **Flexibility:** Great communicators are willing to try new ways to approach and reach their desired audience. Although we saw the rise of the internet in the 2004 campaign, Obama took that communication vehicle to a new level in 2008 and the end result was that millions heard his message through the internet who otherwise might not have.

What communication vehicles have you overlooked or let stagnate recently? It's especially important in this economy to take full stock of all your communication efforts and figure out if there is a new way to reach prospects or to continue to impress existing clients. The same old, same old just won't cut it this year so don't be afraid to experiment with a new way of communicating your message.

- **Openness:** Some people are very good at communicating with those who have the same ideas, values or philosophy as themselves but in front of a more diverse audience, they bomb miserably. The best communicators know how to bridge the gap between their own views and others who may have differing views. Obama was able to do just that and in the process changed the electoral map after decades of unvarying results.

In business this is crucial, especially if you need to create a wider client base and frankly, who doesn't need to do that right now. Spending time to identify and then concentrating on the areas where you have common ground with people is far more productive than focusing on the areas where you disagree or letting that disagreement stop you from doing business with them.

- **Willingness to ask for and utilize help from others:** This may be the most important aspect of Obama's communications during the campaign. He wasn't afraid to ask for help. Just like most nominees before him, he had speechwriters but the key was that he found a speechwriter with whom he developed a symbiotic relationship which means that the words that came out of Obama's mouth felt like his own words even though he had help in molding them into the speeches that became so famous.

As a business person, you may be afraid to ask for help with your business communications because you don't want to lose your own voice and that is a valid concern. The solution is finding a person, either within your own company or an external source, who will work to understand the message you want to convey and enhance it while still maintaining your authenticity.

### **The Advantages of Being a Gifted Communicator**

Like having an Ivy League education, being a gifted communicator comes with a slew of advantages that aren't necessarily available to those who aren't. Take our two examples, neither Obama nor Oprah were born into wealth or prestige but their ability to communicate, along with their determination to succeed, elevated them to where they are now – the first African American president and the first African American woman to become a billionaire.

In business, being a gifted communicator can be the difference between success and failure. Think about what improving your communication skills could do for your business.

- It could mean more customers, from a wider customer base, who stick with you over the long-term because they like what they hear and what you deliver.
- It could mean a more diverse employee base that is motivated by your communication style to make your business a success.
- It could mean more prestige and publicity within your industry and your local business community which will help further promote your business.

Even if you weren't born with IT, as a business owner you really have no choice but to become an effective communicator. Forget nature and spend some time nurturing your communication skills this year. It will be time well spent, whose benefit will far outweigh the effort, when you realize that you too have IT, the gift of communication.