COMMUNICATIONS FOR URBAN FORESTRY[1]

by J. Alan Wagar

In these times of lean budgets, programs without friends have very short life expectancies. To win the friends and influence the people who control the survival of important programs, we need improved communication.

In decades past, trees were generally accepted as an important component of urban life, and in many cities tree budgets tended to keep pace with inflation and the number of trees to be maintained. Under such conditions, urban forestry often needed little promotion. Then, as now, many of us responsible for urban trees were public employees who could not lobby directly for support. As a result, we often did not develop the communication skills needed for survival when government at all levels began looking for ways to economize and for programs to cut.

As a guide for better communications, let me suggest a four-part model and, and an aid to memory, the acronym **OPEC—O** for objectives, **P** for principles, **E** for evaluation, and **C** for correction. Our first challenge is to define goals and objectives. The more specific we can be, the better. Goals normally define broad directions. Objectives are much narrower and are most effective when they specify measurable achievements leading to accomplishment of goals (4,5). As a general goal, for example, a city arborist might think "I need to maintain a work force and budget large enough to keep this city's tree population in a safe and generally attractive condition." Presented only with this general goal the city council is likely to say, "Yeah. What department doesn't need more money?" More specific objectives in support of the goal would be:

- Demonstrate to the city council that the city's tree maintenance is being carried out efficiently and that cost-effectiveness is improving.
- Demonstrate to the same council that preventive maintenance of trees will reduce costs for removals, replanting, and potential damage suits (7).
- Provide the Directors of The Friends of Oakville's Trees with pertinent facts, should they wish to support an increased tree maintenance budget at hearings before the city council.
- Inform the citizens of Oakville of the increased risks to people and property that can be expected from broken sidewalks, falling limbs, and windthrown trees if tree maintenance is deferred.

Notice that target audiences are specified in these objectives and that some objectives assume the existence and use of key records and cost analyses. Perhaps as a legacy from easier times, some city tree departments do not yet keep such records. Yet, without data to show the costs associated with various tree species, management operations, sites,and tree sizes or ages, we have little basis for defining 'good" or figuring out how to be better. Computerized tree inventory and cost—analysis systems—such as those being developed in the California cities of Oakland and Santa Maria—should provide a factual base to support the case for urban forestry (1). Facts are essential before a communication blitz is launched. In other words, "Engage brain before activating mouth!"

Next in our OPEC acronym is P for principles. Although communication is an art, a tremendous amount of experience has already been condensed into a few principles that can be learned and applied (6).

Perhaps the overriding principle is to maintain continuous communication as a basis for continued support. Manufacturers of popular products, for example, do not coast on their reputations but continue to advertise. Organizations often go to considerable lengths to maintain a good organizational image, even if they do not sell directly to the public. Thus they may sponsor TV programs on either public or commercial channels and buy advertising space in major newspapers and magazines. We also need continuous com-

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munication. Once a crisis develops, we may not have time to create support and reverse it.

A second principle is to recognize that people are the most receptive to information they consider interesting, enjoyable, or useful (that is, of high benefit). Too often we concentrate on telling people what we think "they ought to know" rather than considering why they would want to know it or what approach would make it interesting. Information is most effective when stated in terms of the interests of the audience. Taxpayers, for example, expect safe and attractive streets at reasonable cost. As individual homeowners they want the trees in front of their homes to be well maintained and create minimal nuisances, and they want "the City" to know the history, condition, and needs of such trees. City administrators want to know that a program is cost-effective, and politicians are happiest when convinced that whatever actions they take on behalf of our programs will please an important group of constituents.

The easier information is to obtain and understand, the more willingly people will be to pay attention to it. Listening, for example, is easier than reading for many people, making radio and television the preferred media for many kinds of messages. Rudolf Flesch (2) showed that short sentences with little words are easier to understand than long sentences with big words, and he developed formulas for rating readability.

By considering the benefits people find in a message along with the difficulty (or cost) involved in understanding it, we create a sort of benefit-cost ratio. The higher a message's benefit-cost ratio, the greater its effectiveness.

For greatest effectiveness, we need to use words, symbols, examples, and analogies that are familiar to our audience. For example, when Charles Lewis of the Morton Arboretum faced the challenge of telling a group of inner-city teenagers about a forest (3), he struck on the idea of "nature city." He discussed different communities as "neighborhoods," spoke of scavengers as "garbage collectors," and raised such questions as: What kind of "pipes" are used in nature city to get water to where it is needed? Who planted the flowers? And where do various residents get their food? In essence, he translated the concepts he wanted to communicate into the language and experiences of his audience.

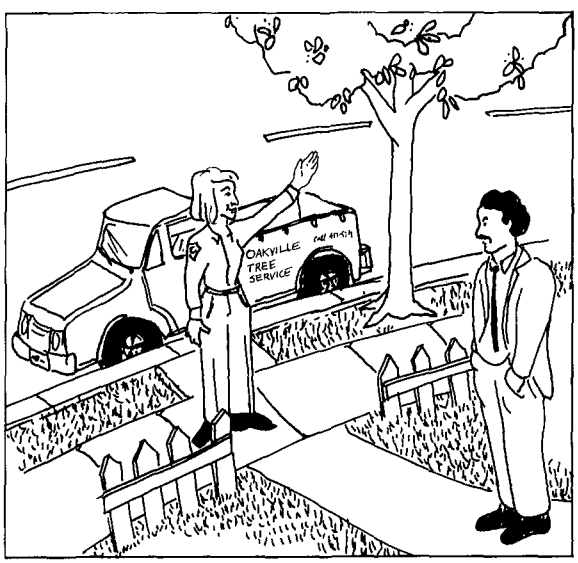

Fig. 1. Communication helps to win friends and influence people.

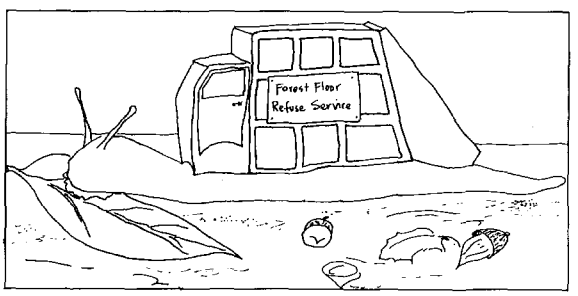

Fig. 2. Use words, symbols, and examples familiar to your audience.

To be persuasive, a message must arouse needs in the audience. But, unless a means of satisfying those needs is provided, appeals to action tend to be ignored. For example, the threat of tooth decay arouses people's needs for protection. The protective action usually suggested is "use our brand of toothpaste." A similar appeal might be "Don't let beautiful Oakville become another concrete jungle. Protect our beauty and property values by supporting the tree maintenance budget."

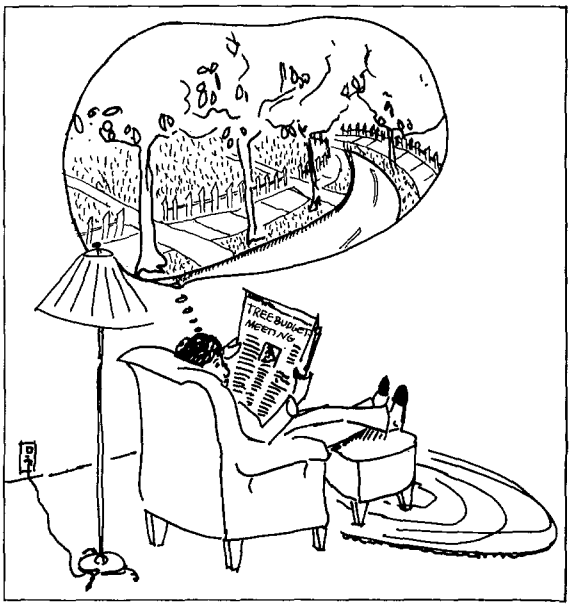

Fig. 3. Persuasive messages usually arouse needs (protect beauty and property values) and suggest a means to satisfy the needs (support the tree budget).

In general, the more senses used to convey information, the better it will be retained. Audiovisual messages are more powerful than messages that are only seen or heard; text is more effective when accompanied by illustrations; and learning is enhanced when people can handle real objects or actually participate in the matter to be learned. Maybe we should hand the city council or president of the garden club some splinters from the most recently windthrown tree or take them for a stroll on the broken sidewalk that generated the most recent lawsuit against the city.

Such animated presentations as movies, changing slides, live animals, and recorded narration or music usually hold people's interest better than static presentations having only written text or text and pictures. The dynamic media associated with entertainment—for example, motion pictures and videotape—are usually more effective than the books, charts, and chalkboards typically associated with traditional classroom education. Some of this added effectiveness, or lack of it, probably results from association with pleasant or unpleasant experiences. Advertisers, however, soon find the most attractive and powerful media available, and we can profit from their example.

A final and certainly a key principle for communications is to identify and reach audiences that count, using whatever media are effective. If we talk mostly to people who already share our goals, it's easy to become complacent. "Preaching to the saved," however, while good for our morale, won't win many converts. We need to reach out. One feature article in a Sunday supplement, for example, will reach far more homeowners than half a dozen articles in professional journals. And reaching some decision makers may require letters, phone calls, or luncheon visits by interest-group leaders or others in positions of influence.

The remaining parts of our OPEC formula are E for evaluation and C for correcton. In face-to-face communication we continually *evaluate* facial expressions, body language, and the other person's comments to determine what effect we are having. On the basis of this "feedback" we tend to modify or *correct* our approach until we achieve the intended effect. In addressing larger audiences, however, and especially unseen audiences reached by radio, television, newspapers, or magazines, we lose the benefit of direct feedback. One approach is to pre-test the message on a smaller group, preferably one similar to the audience we eventually want to reach. We need to find out what group members

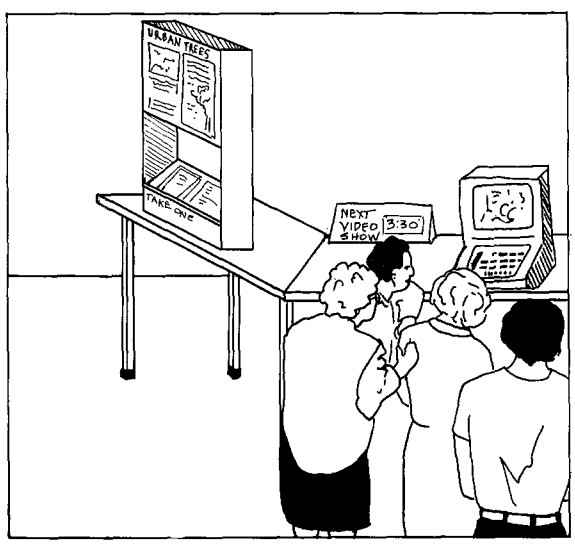

Fig. 4. Animated presentations hold interest better than static presentations.

learn, like, and dislike in a presentation. In this way we can evaluate and correct quickly, before getting locked into a pattern that doesn't work. An alternative approach is to wait for what action follows our efforts, for example, whether our program gets funded or gets the axe. Waiting for consequences has some risks!

To win friends and support for urban forestry programs, we obviously need to do a good job and to document and demonstrate that we are efficient, responsive to public needs, and cost effective. Beyond that, however, we must convince many people that their support is essential. Fortunately, people are likely to be receptive, especially if we communicate in terms of their interests. Many folks get really excited about trees. On the positive side, they often delight in the beauty of trees, enjoy the shade provided, and are even awed by some trees. They can also get excited about problems that may be intensified when trees are neglected—broken sidewalks, falling branches, litter, and blocked views, for example.

Professional communicators can help us harness people's widespread interest in trees, and we need to start cultivating free-lance writers, photographers, editors, television commentators, and others with access to mass media that reach wide audiences. Because these professionals are continually looking for material that will interest their readers, viewers, and listeners, they will

Fig. 5. Pretest the message on a small group.

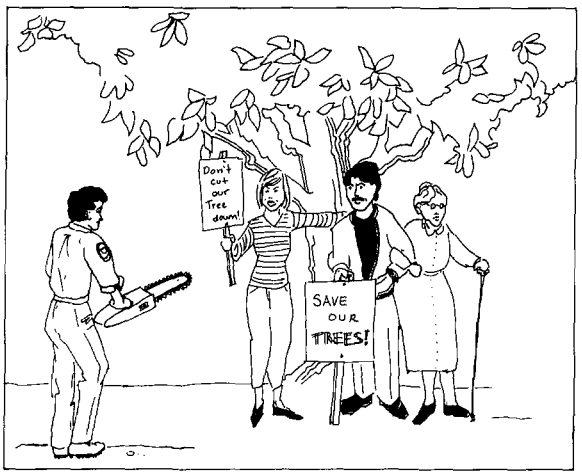

Fig. 6. People get excited about trees.

generally welcome the information and insights we can provide.

Although our representation pattern of government does not permit every citizen to vote on every issue, communication is the first step toward building broad-based support and a pool of people willing to form and support interest groups. Such groups have great influence upon elected representatives and other officials who control programs and budgets. In wildland matters, for example, the Sierra Club has political clout out of all proportion to its numbers. On the urban scene, cities are now spawning such groups as the TreePeople in Los Angeles, San Francisco's Friends of the Urban Forest, and the Oakland Neighborhood Tree Organizing Program (ON TOP). Garden clubs have an obvious interest in the vegetation and beauty of a city and often have considerable political clout. Many other community groups are also likely supporters of urban forestry. But, since we haven't had to do much promoting over the years, we now need extra effort to become visible, show people why our interests are their interests, and let them know how they can help.

As mentioned, many of us are precluded from lobbying for our programs. We are not precluded, however, from joining and working actively in such groups as the International Society of Arboriculture, the Municipal Arborists Association, the National Urban Forest Council, and the California Urban Forests Council. These groups can

become vital links between citizens, public officials, and professionals in urban forestry. In fact, the excellent newsletter "Urban Forestry," published quarterly by the California Urban Forests Council says it all right under the masthead: "Linking: people, professionals, industry, government, educators & communities." Communication is a key element in creating these linkages and building an active and effective constituency for urban forestry.

If we think of urban tree programs as a small canoe that could easily be swept away by the stream of day-to-day events, then communication is the paddle that permits us to work against the current. It takes quite a bit of paddling just to maintain our position and a lot more to make progress. Given the mood of the country, the current seems likely to get swifter. The moral to be drawn is this: Now is no time to be up the creek without the paddle! We need communication.

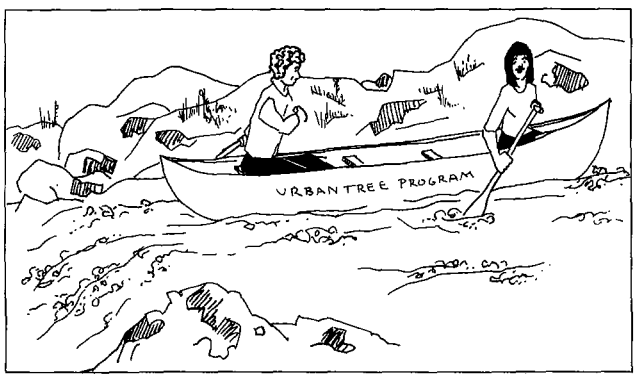

Fig. 7. Communication lets us paddle against the current.

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U.S. Forest Service
1960 Addison St.
PO Box 245
Berkeley, California 94701

ABSTRACT

CATRON, PHILIP E. 1984. **Preventing spray-rig accidents.** Grounds Maintenance 19(11): 24,26, 100.

An important consideration that the tree care or tree/shrub care industries deal with is the accidental spilling of dilute materials from applicator vehicles during transport between job sites. Excessive speed, following too closely, not keeping your eyes on the road, and backing up are some of the causes. Three features of spray rigs call for special driving skills: height, weight, and fluid load. Combining the above information suggests the place where most accidents occur—an intersection. Intersection conditions change constantly and sometimes quickly. Anticipating what is going on in the intersection before you get there can prevent an accident, even a fender-bender. When a truck rolls and pesticides are spilled, there are certain things that need to be done. First and foremost is that emergency medical assistance be given to any people involved. The second step is to contain the spill. Next, notify your employer.