

# The *Dance* of the *Four Veils*

by Tom Ahern

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**Editors' note:** *In the current economic environment, it's vital that every communication from your organization hits its mark. Effectively communicating the value of your work and engaging constituents is an essential organizational skill. Excerpted from Tom Ahern's book Seeing through a Donor's Eyes, this article reminds readers of some of the fundamentals. Nonprofit Quarterly readers may also want to refer to the Fall 2005 issue on communications and the article "Wanted: Master Storytellers" by Susan Nall Bales.*

**F**OR THE MOST PART, NONPROFIT COMMUNICATIONS are boring. Not on purpose, mind you. Still, they are almost always uninteresting. Why? Because they swaddle themselves in one or more of the following interest-draining veils.

## **Veil Number One: Avoiding Conflict at All Costs**

Ditto for controversy, uncomfortable truths, and subjects or language that might upset people.

Conflict and controversy are the essence of drama. Drama automatically engages and

intrigues us, because our brains are wired to respond to such stimuli. Drama moves people. Drama overcomes indifference and inertia, which are your real enemies when you're trying to communicate, and particularly when you're trying to fundraise.

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

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

Bear in mind too that your solution to such problems is what makes your organization 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.

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## Veil Number Two: A Tendency toward Weak, Bland Language Rather Than Bold, Vivid Words

Consider headline verbs, for example.

Here's a collection of verbs plucked from headlines in the *Wall Street Journal*: *mauls*, *devours*, *looms*, *sparks*, *threatens*, *embraces*, *sputters*, *sows*, *surges*, *rejects*, *retools*, and so on. What characterizes these 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.

In contrast, here are verbs that I scoured from headlines in nonprofit newsletters: *establishes*, *lists*, *uses*, *unites*, *reaches*, *gives back*, *plans*, *unifies*, *builds*, *sets*, *visits*, *shares*, *administers*, *awards*, *helps*, *benefits*.

What characterizes these verbs? They are inconclusive (*shares*), weak (*administers*), unnecessarily lofty (*unifies*), and flat (*visits*, as in "visits an issue"). In sum: no impact.



## Veil Number Three: Faint Appreciation for the Emotional Basis of Human Response

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

As noted earlier, 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 to 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 Number Four: Relying on 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 communication explaining itself: "Our awareness and efforts now focus on community-impact goals, and how we feed into that. *In other words*, our work has become driven more by mission than by function. We need the multipronged approach to move public will, and there has been an exponential benefit of working more closely and in concert [emphasis added by author]."

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*, which bring to mind all sorts of positive connotations among educators, do not resonate the same way for the average person.

And the average person—who isn't 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 few contributors were specialists conversant with academic jargon.

Return to the example of nonconversational writing that opened this chapter. The full text reads as follows:

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

"If all goes according to plan, within a decade 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, commitment, and 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 (rather than an ordinary) plan. These are all things 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."

So what does *concrete* mean? "If you can examine something with your senses, it's concrete. A V8 engine is concrete, whereas the term *high-performance* is abstract. Most of the time, concreteness boils down to specific people doing specific things."

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Chip and Dan Heath**