

Can you play Charades?

You know the game – you've got to guess the name of a film, book (or similar!) from the mime performed by one of your friends....

There's a lot of fuss made about the 7% of communication which is the words we use. The figure is often cited, but less often understood, which leads me to ask....

Can you play charades?

The answer, for me at least, is something like "Yes, but only when I've had a drink". You might be more outgoing than me. Or less. The important point here is that no matter how good you are at it, unless the person miming is cheating and using a formal Sign Language it's not an easy game. That's the whole point.

If we could do it straight away it wouldn't be fun.

And yet there are people involved in communications training that claim that the words we use in communication account for only 7% or meaning and 55% of the communication takes place by using body language.

Oh yeah?

Coupled with "tonality" (that is, the way we say things rather than what we say) the assertion is that a whopping 93% of communication has nothing to do with the words we use. If that was the case, I might just have managed better on holiday in France this year! Seriously, if you hear a language you've never heard before, do you really think you can understand 93% of what the speaker is saying?

No? Didn't think so.

And yet there are trainers out there still propounding the myth. To be fair it's based upon some research and they'll probably defend themselves on that grounds: it's also so widely banded about by various people so that many people regard it as 'received wisdom'. It isn't. Frankly, it's wrong.

Well, actually, it's not so much wrong as wrongly applied. It's been taken out of context and bandied about with very little real understanding. The person who did the original research, (Prof Albert Mehrabrian of UCLA) made a big thing of pointing out to people that his research was specifically to do with personal likes and dislikes and that it could absolutely not be applied in other contexts. It was laboratory work, not ready to be applied in the real world, yet. It wasn't generalised or robust enough.

It's the communication equivalent to rushing out and selling Dolly the Sheep (the clone)

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as soon as the cloning process was successful, without doing the rest of the necessary lab-work. After has Dolly become common on farms it's too late to discover that once in the field, Dolly aged and died in only a few months, that her meat was un-eatable and her wool was un-wearable!

Prof Mehrabian's work was based upon volunteers in a laboratory saying one word only. That word was "maybe" and he picked it specifically because of its neutrality! Given those conditions, it's not surprising that the 'value' of the word was only 7%. In fact it's perhaps a bit worrying that it was as high as that!

No one's disputing that there's more to communication than the words you use. In fact, at Curved Vision we have theatrical backgrounds and we are very much aware of the old adage that "It's not what you say, it's the way that you say it" but we also have a thorough training and background in social science and research. We believe in getting it right. We'd agree that most people don't communicate as well as they could (and many people don't communicate as well as they think they do) but we don't believe in scare-tactics either. We don't use the 7% stuff, not because it's wrong, just because it's irrelevant.