



## Stop Rambling, Start Frontloading

By Connie Dieken



You're at the office, sleeves rolled up, ready to face the day with focus and determination. With the wind at your back, you target task after task. But then, *screeeeech...halt*. In walks *this* guy. "Do you have a sec? Um, you know, I've been thinking about that problem we talked about? And maybe this isn't the best solution? And you might not want to use it? But anyway..." For a while, you were Peyton Manning driving for a touchdown—but you just got sacked.

Ramblers force you to wade through their long-winded, tedious communication to figure out the points they're trying to make. Your mind wanders as they jabber away. You'll tune in and out intermittently and may arrive at an erroneous conclusion as a result.

Consider the convoluted ravings of the recently famous John Mark Karr. His astonishing declaration, "*I was with JonBenét when she died,*" was tangled up with confusion and inconsistency that led the media and the public to a false conclusion. His ambiguous ramblings wasted a lot of time and money.

What's the solution? Frontloading. This is a vital communication technique that prevents ambiguous rambling and leads to better business decisions. Frontloading is my term for delivering the most important part of the message first, then backing it up: in other words, don't bury the good stuff. Frontloading a message captures people's attention by giving them what they want and need right from the start and helps them draw the right conclusions. This applies to meetings, phone calls, e-mails, everything.

As a leader, you sit through many presentations and pitches and listen to a lot of people. It's draining to be presented with long-winded, disorganized ideas that force you to play traffic cop and guide yourself through the quagmire of what's relevant and what's not. It wastes your time and energy when others fail to frontload.

The question is, do you frontload? Or do you ramble? Here's how to frontload for results:

- **Start with your conclusion.** No matter how complicated your message may be, pick the single most important point and lead with it. Give people what they want and need *first*. This cuts through ambiguity and provides clarity.
- **Filter out the fluff.** Listeners can get stuck on an ambiguous message, like reporters did with Karr's "confession." Poorly presented information allows people to hear

what they want to hear and jump to false conclusions. It destroys credibility, undercuts trust, and wastes time.

- **Think Google keywords.** You're using the power of frontloading when you conduct a Google search, typing in keywords and hot-button phrases. Use this same technique to engage listeners. Get their attention with issues and keywords that matter to them, not to you.
- **Stack a show like a TV producer.** TV producers use frontloading liberally. Take *The Today Show* as an example. The program keeps you watching by presenting a "tease," a short preview of what's coming up later in the program. You're intrigued, so you stay tuned. Stack *your* presentations by teasing what's to come.
- **Frontload with a benefit.** Advertisers frequently use this technique to attract buyers. Pringles with Olean is "the fat-free potato chip." What benefit do you offer up front?
- **Lead with the outcome you want.** Begin with an unmistakable action you want someone to take. Think "Show me the money!" from the movie *Jerry Maguire*.
- **Don't backload.** Don't try to justify your point before you make it. You will send a signal that you are unsure of your conclusion and are seeking validation. People will tune out.
- **Frontload to defuse anger.** Don't ignore a difficult issue hoping it will go away. Address it right up front before it festers. Verizon Wireless customer service reps are trained to respond to hostility by saying, "I can definitely help you with that." This defuses anger and indicates that a solution exists.
- **Self-edit or others will do it for you.** Lead with your most important take-away point or your listeners will decide for themselves what's significant. They may miss your message entirely.

"Instant" used to be associated with coffee, not communication. But in today's fast-paced society, unless you make an immediate connection, your opportunity may vanish. People won't sit patiently through hemming and hawing any more. It's time to focus on frontloading and use it to your advantage.

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