3.1: Understanding the Gatekeeper Audience

As we will discuss in Lesson 4, determining and researching the key audience for the message you will be creating is one of the most important parts of message development. But there is another, perhaps even more, important initial audience for your work, and that is the person in the organization who will approve, support, or squash your ideas.

Referred to as “gatekeepers” these are the people within the organization who not only hand out the assignments, they are also the ones with the power to decide:

- which messages are produced
- who produces the messages
- where the messages will appear
- what the messages will contain
Examples of “gatekeepers” in communications or business organizations include:

- a newspaper’s assistant managing editors who assign stories to appropriate reporters
- a television station’s producers and assignment editors
- advertising agency account executives
- public relations firm client services managers
- a corporation’s chief communications officer who decides whether the new communications plan is ready to present to the CEO

An important function of gatekeepers is to maintain the standards and the “voice” that define the specific organization for which they are “keeping the gates.”

Within a newspaper organization, the assistant managing editor who assigns stories to various reporters on a beat has the responsibility to decide whether the reporters’ stories are acceptable before the stories are sent along to the next step in the process of getting printed in the newspaper and posted online.

Reporters learn to anticipate the kinds of stories that their editors (the gatekeeper audience members) want. One editor may respond positively every time a reporter writes a story that includes a quote from a particular source. That reporter will try to include that source in her stories as often as possible. In a television news operation, the newscast producer might respond well every time a reporter/photographer team does a story that is accompanied by particular types of images. Again, that reporter/photographer team will try as often as possible to select that type of video to please the producer and thus assure a spot on the newscast.

In an advertising agency, the account management professionals perform a similar gatekeeper function. Client services managers in a PR firm perform the same function. They are responsible for contact with the client who is paying to have the ads created or the public relations work done. If the account manager is unhappy with the advertising or PR campaign that the other professionals have created, it may not get passed along for client approval. Communicators learn to adjust their efforts and create ads or PR work that account managers or client services managers are most likely to define as acceptable and ready for client review.

In a business, non-profit organization, government agency or similar types of institutions, the communications manager for the organization plays the gatekeeper role. Any content that appears on the organization’s website, the social media content that is produced, the promotions sent to mobile devices and any other messages directed at the public go through a review process. Communicators inside an organization have to conform to the rules, processes and expectations of the communications manager if their work is going to be delivered to audiences.

At the initial stage in the message process gatekeepers are the ones who will be issuing assignments. They are the ones who will determine if you delivered what was requested and they are the ones you will need to work with to clarify the assignment so you have the best chance of successfully delivering what is needed.

Gatekeepers will have in mind the needs of the ultimate “client” for whatever work you produce. The editor of a publication will understand who the readers are and what they look for in the articles that run. The PR client manager will understand the objectives of the client for the campaign. The advertising account manager will know the advertiser’s sales goals. The corporate communications manager will know what image the company is trying to project. Your job is to interpret the work assignment given you and know how the work you produce will ultimately help everyone’s
objectives be met.