

## Getting the Message Out

*“Have something to say and say it as clearly as you can.  
That is the only secret of style.”*

—Matthew Arnold

WHEN I FIRST INTERVIEWED FOR A JOB WITH THE ACADEMY, I explained that I wasn't an actuary and, in fact, wasn't very good at math. I was afraid I could never really comprehend what actuaries were doing because I didn't understand the science behind their work.

“Don't worry,” I was told, “the actuaries will go off in the corner and do their thing and you just have to help communicate the results.”

That turned out to be not as easy as it sounds.

The real secret to effective public policy is the ability to explain things to policy-makers. You can come up with lots of good ideas, but if you don't clearly communicate them, all of your hard work is wasted. Unfortunately, the actuarial profession doesn't always do a good job of getting its ideas across to nonactuaries.

It's not really the fault of actuaries. The basis of actuarial science is mathematical precision. Actuaries start with statistical analysis and generate numerical results. They take great pains to qualify their work product and explain the limitations of the data they used and their method of analysis. The result should be a work product that fully addresses the issues.

A big problem arises when actuaries use those same methods to communicate to policy-makers. It's not that people in government or the news media are stupid. They want to understand the problem and the pros and cons of any proposal to deal with the issue. Policy-makers appreciate that actuaries can provide a thorough and unbiased review of the issues they deal with. But they use a different language to talk to each other. In order to effectively reach policy-makers, the actuarial profession needs to learn a new way to speak. It's our job at the Academy to help translate what our members want to say into words that policy-makers want to listen to and can understand.

The first key to effective communication is knowing your audience. What works to help congressional staff understand an issue may not be useful in dealing with reporters. Communicating an idea to the general public can be different from testifying before

a legislative com-

mittee. In order to get an idea across, you need to tailor how you communicate based on the particular group you're trying to reach.

Another important requirement is to get a feel for what the audience wants to know about. I'm not implying that you only say what you think people want to hear. Rather, it does you no good to produce a well-thought-out work product on a particular subject if no one is interested. You've got to respond to the needs of the people you're trying to reach, not just talk about what you think is interesting.

You've also got to be timely. Policy-makers generally expect quick responses to their questions. This doesn't mean your answers shouldn't be thought out or not based on sound actuarial analysis. What's important is to be prepared to respond to policy-makers when they need information and not a year after the issue has been raised and already decided.

Finally, the actuarial profession needs to explore different ways to communicate its ideas. News conferences, web-based communication, legislative testimony, issue briefs, off-the-record conversations with reporters and Hill staff—all are important tools for the Academy to use in communicating its message.

Quite frankly, some of the actuaries I talk to feel insulted when we try to change their work into a more user-friendly format for policy-makers. They say we are “dumbing down” or “spinning” their analysis. While I appreciate these concerns, I would suggest that effective and thoughtful analysis is only the starting point. Getting the message across is just as important.

There's an old adage about the profession that an actuary is someone who, if you ask the time, will tell you how to build a watch. That, in a nutshell, explains the challenge faced by the Academy in reaching policy-makers. It's important to build a good watch, but never forget policy-makers are more likely to be interested in what time it is. ●



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