

To Reach the Individual, Find the Group

Not all audiences are created equal, and nobody's a category. To make a connection, consider how groups think about themselves.

On the surface, the business of communication requires a message to deliver and an audience to receive it. The better the message fits the audience, the more successful it'll be. But dig a little deeper: What is an audience? Is it any collection of people in some sort of proximity? Or does an audience require individuals to recognize themselves as part of a group?

For social animals like human beings, group membership is an intrinsic part of their identity. The group is a powerful lever to encourage individuals to act. Understanding group dynamics offers opportunities for engagement that simply aren't available outside the group.

Aggregates, Categories, and Groups

Sociologists distinguish groups from aggregates (people in proximity who don't interact or share a sense of identity) and from categories (individuals who share characteristics but don't interact). A group is any collection of two or more people who interact for some reason and who consider their identity somehow informed by that interaction.

Speaking to a group is much more effective than addressing aggregates or categories. Aggregates are superficial and situational. Nobody is a category — categories are abstractions that require members to recognize some common interest to become activated.

How to Talk So Groups Will Listen

To create a connection between yourself and an audience, you can:

- Approach an existing group and convince them that you belong
- Approach an aggregate or category and convince them that they're actually a group based on something meaningful they have in common — preferably, something that involves you and your brand

Whatever audience you start with, Job 1 is to weed out aggregate thinking and category thinking, then dig down to the group level. That's where you're going to find the connections that prompt people to embrace a message and pass it on.