



free-range thinking is a monthly journal of best practices, resources, and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact.

Why People Listen to Chris Christie

Even if you dislike the New Jersey governor's politics, you have to respect the way he delivers his message.

Given a choice between increasing taxes on New Jersey's millionaires or reaching into the pockets of teachers, Governor Chris Christie has gone after the teachers. I could dislike him for that alone, but when you throw in his views on gay marriage (against), a woman's right to choose (against), and environmental protection (not if it's bad for business), I *really* can't stand the guy. So when I see Christie speak live on TV or recorded in clips on YouTube, why do I find him so darned likable?

Apparently, I'm not alone in this. Christie is a rapidly rising star in the Republican Party and his name keeps surfacing in discussions of the 2012 presidential race. Christie flatly denies any interest, and he does so with humor and humility, which only makes him *more* likable. In fact, whatever subject he tackles, Christie regularly demonstrates mastery of three techniques essential for delivering a tough message:

Be a person first.

Audiences don't separate the messenger from his message. If they don't like the speaker, they're probably not going to like (or even listen to) what he has to say. Christie clearly understands this, so he frequently talks about himself or his family to establish a connection with his audience *before* getting into potentially sticky issues.



New Jersey Governor Chris Christie

In the YouTube clip "Chris Christie on His Style," a voter chastises the governor for his brusque, often confrontational approach. Christie offers this reply: "I have an Irish father, and I had - before she passed away six years ago - a Sicilian mother. Now, for those of you who have been exposed to the combination of Irish and Sicilian, it has made me *not unfamiliar* with

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conflict. In my house, my parents left *nothing* unsaid." Listen to how Christie delivers this line (during the first minute of this [clip](#)) and you'll see why the audience laughs and, more importantly, how Christie became a person in that room before he had to be a politician.

Connect on an emotional level.

There's a reason politicians talk about the battle for "hearts and minds" and not for "minds and hearts." Human beings respond emotionally to incoming information even before their brains are fully engaged. If our emotions are negative (e.g., anger, distrust, fear), our brains will find ways to ignore or discount the incoming information. In short: we believe what we *want* to believe.

Christie understands this, too, and he often uses humor to emotionally connect with his audiences before asking them to seriously consider a controversial proposition. Forced to explain why he believes New Jersey's teachers should contribute part of their salaries to cover health care benefits, Christie manages to be both funny and persuasive in this [clip](#), aptly titled "This is the crap I have to hear."

Tell stories.

In a recent profile on Christie, *New York Times* political columnist Matt Bai recounted how the governor used a story to explain a fundamental problem with his state's insurance plans:

When he was a federal prosecutor, Christie told the audience, he got to choose from about 100 health-insurance plans, ranging from cheap to quite expensive. But as soon as he became governor, the "benefits lady" told him he had only three state plans from which to choose, Goldilocks-style; one was great, one was modestly generous and one was rather miserly. And any of the three would cost him exactly 1.5 percent of his salary.

"You're telling me," Christie said he told the woman, feigning befuddlement, "that no matter which one I pick - the good one, or the O.K. one, or the bad one - I'm going to pay 1 1/2 percent of my salary?" And she said, "Yes."

"And I said, then everyone picks the really good one, right? And she said, 'Ninety-six percent of state employees pick the really good one.'"

"Which led me to have two reactions," Christie told the crowd. "First, bring those other 4 percent to me! Because when I have to start laying people off, they're the first ones!" His audience burst into near hysterics. "And the second reaction was, of course I would choose the best plan," Christie said, "and so would you."

[Excepted from "How Chris Christie Did His Homework," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2011]

Christie also abides by a basic rule of narrative: a strong protagonist needs an equally powerful antagonist to make the story interesting. At the same time, he is very careful when choosing antagonists. In his campaign to have teachers cover a portion of their health care costs, Christie is careful *not* to make the teachers themselves his antagonist. Instead, he casts their *union* in that role.

"The union collects \$730 a year from every teacher and school employee in the union in mandatory dues," Christie told one audience in

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New Jersey. "And if you don't want to join the union, here's your option: you can be out, [but] you pay 85% of \$730 to be out. It's like the Hotel California, you know? You can check in anytime you like, but you can never leave." (Click here to see the entire [clip](#), "Not About Teachers" on YouTube.)

In a tribute to Ronald Reagan last February, former U.S. Senator Fred Thompson wrote, "His reputation as The Great Communicator boils down to three basic traits: he was simple; he was clear; he was sincere." Christie displays those traits as well, and even if he's not running in 2012, he's already vying for the title of Next Great Communicator. Those who oppose his agenda and have tough messages of their own to convey would do well to learn from his success.

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Do Communications Trainings Work?

A new study commissioned by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation offers a qualified yes.

Since 2003, the Hewlett Foundation has been sending groups of grantees to communications trainings conducted by the Washington, DC-based firm Spitfire Strategies. At these trainings, participants learned about strategic communications planning, message development, storytelling, presenting, leveraging social media, engaging policy makers, and other subjects. (Full disclosure: I facilitated the workshops on storytelling and presenting, so I'm not entirely impartial about this study. Okay, I'm not impartial *at all*.)



Eric Brown, communications director for Hewlett, attended these trainings and consistently heard good feedback from the participants, but in 2010 he decided to conduct a formal evaluation to answer questions that had been nagging him over the years: Do they work? Is there a lasting, measurable impact after the trainings are completed?

Last year, the Hewlett Foundation hired Williams Group to conduct an independent assessment of Spitfire trainings offered to Hewlett grantees over several years. The three big take-aways from the research are:

1. ***The trainings are excellent.*** Even several years after participating in the trainings, grantees still remark on the high quality of the trainers, the tools, and the curriculum.
2. ***Recruitment is key.*** Having the right mix of senior staff and implementers from an organization is a prerequisite for success. The researchers also confirmed that selecting organizations with the capability to implement the lessons of the training is critical.
3. ***Follow-up by the Foundation is essential.*** Training can be very helpful, but there has to be a system to ensure that grantees use the follow-up technical assistance built into the program, that program officers at the Foundation personally speak with their grantees about what they learned, and perhaps most important, that Foundation program staff ask for the communications plan or campaign plan that the grantees created during the training.

If you work at a foundation that is considering sponsoring communications trainings, or if your nonprofit sends staff to similar trainings, the report offers valuable insights on what works and what can be improved. To read the full report, "What Nonprofits Say," click [here](#).

In addition, the Communications Network will be conducting a webinar on the report for members, but anyone is welcome to view the recording of the webinar, which will be posted [here](#) on March 11.

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New, Improved Storytelling Webinar

Our most popular online class returns April 5 with new content.

Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative returns in April to help you tell more compelling stories about your organization's work, but we've made some important changes and added new curriculum. Over the four weeks of the class, we will cover:

- The fundamental structure of good stories
- The 7 qualities that make stories memorable
- The most common mistakes in storytelling and how to avoid them (*new!*)
- The 6 kinds of stories you must tell, and how to tell them for advocacy, development, recruitment and more



Each online class runs 1 hour, and our next set of classes are scheduled for April 5, 13, 19 and 26 from 9-10a PT each day. Tuition is \$500 per student and discounts are available to organizations registering 3 or more. To find out more and reserve your space, click [here](#).

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