Abstract: The article presents the importance of audience in successful professional oral communication. The introductory part of the article mentions the recent studies on audience in oral communication and indicates audience’s role in the process of communication. The study gives the definition of audience and moves to audience typology. Then, the analysis focuses on audience analysis and on the potential benefits of audience awareness. The paper also deals with strategies of catching and maintaining audience’s attention on the whole duration of the presentation. In the final part, conclusions are presented on the significant role played by anticipating and understanding audience’s needs for efficient communication.

Keywords: the definition of audience, audience typology, audience analysis, expected vs. real audience, audience expectations, motivating the audience, passive and active audience

JEL Classification: A00, A20.

This article focuses on the particularities of oral communication in the business environment and presents the importance of targeting the message towards an audience in order to achieve successful professional communication. Even if, both in oral and written communication, the author of the message must take into consideration the audience, in oral communication the audience plays a more powerful role since
successful interaction means successful communication. The feedback is direct and is emitted instantly.

There are numerous recent studies and articles, as well as more extensive research on this topic, most of these deal with audience in the oral variety of communication. To mention only a few: Boyed (2005), Schultze & Schultze (2006) and Tollefson & Peterson (2000); Halloran & Blumler (1977) have published an entire book dedicated to audience, Callison & Lamb (2004) deal with audience analysis, Davidson (2002) discusses the importance of audience in an entire chapter in his book on public speaking. In addition Faber (2002) and Longo (1995), as well as Ewart, Sedorkin and Schiarto (1998) analyze audience and its impact on professional communication.

The purpose of oral communication, and in this particular case of study, of professional oral communication is crucial. That is why all aspects of communication, those that can be analyzed and anticipated, must be taken into consideration. In the theory of communication, linguists consider that there are six elements that create the process of communication: the sender (in our case the communicator), the message or the information, the medium of exchange (oral delivery, in our study), the interference, the receiver or the audience and the feedback, provided by the receiver (in our study named the audience). The importance of the audience factor is evident even at this point, as two out of six elements are directly linked to it.

There are many definitions on the concept of audience, but one of the simplest and most comprehensive is the following: an audience is a group of persons who listen to a particular communication string that is delivered to them. In fact, an audience is an abstract concept of persons who use a medium to receive information, and it is made up of individuals, but they are viewed as a collective group. Consequently, it is very difficult to know and anticipate audience’s needs, as individuals do not have the same knowledge of the conversational subject, do not have the same wishes and desires and most importantly, do not assimilate or interpret the message delivered to them in the same way.

Professionals usually communicate in order to inform or to persuade, and they must do this creating and maintaining an
atmosphere of goodwill. In order to do that, they have to anticipate the needs of the audience. So, knowing and understanding how to do that, they must have as much information about the audience as possible. Firstly, they have to identify what type of audience they will face. An audience can be made of an infinite variety of different sizes and different topologies; it can be a group of similar people, or a combination of different groups of people. A simple classification, according to the level of knowledge and to the motivation of the attendee is: lay audience (people with no special knowledge of the subject matter, but who are interested to learn new information), managerial audience (people who need new or more information on a certain topic in order to make business decisions) and expert audience (people who possess much information on the subject matter, who are interested in listening to the latest scientific discoveries in the field). A different classification of audiences, according to the environment in which the audience is constituted, is: academic and non-academic audiences. Academic audience is considered any kind of audience that is supposed to grade the speaker, such as teachers, university professors, admission officers, etc. Non-academic audience is the one that listens to the oral presentation for other reasons than to grade the deliverer.

In order to establish what type of audience they will be talking to, professionals must take into consideration several elements connected to their audience. This process is called audience analysis, and it is imperative that it is carried out thoroughly and carefully. Nothing should be assumed or presumed, everything must be well documented. So, the professional playing the role of communicator must have, as accurately as possible and as much as possible, information about the audience’s age, sex, cultural and educational background, economic status, political and religious beliefs. Also the level of information about the subject matter is very important, because the message is structured differently when talking to novices, specialists or experts. All these variables must be well investigated for every particular case, as one wrong assumption about the audience may cause miscommunication and failure to achieve communication purpose.
In the business environment, professionals, being in the situation of addressing a managerial audience, are facing a difficult task when anticipating the level of information about a certain topic, as well as the knowledge of the audience about the numerous technical terms involved. Ideally, the communicator needs to constantly check the feedback offered by the audience, and in case negative signals are intercepted, must adjust the message (for example to explain the jargon used, or to give more details, examples, etc.). However they must be very attentive not to provide too much information, or too many details and explanations which may create a negative attitude of the audience, like boredom or confusion, and may impair the attainment of the communication goal.

This raises another problem related to audience, namely that there is a difference between the ‘expected audience’ and the ‘real audience’. The communicator structures the message according to an ‘expected’ audience’, but has to deliver to the real audience, hence certain adjustments must be made, just as it was stated previously. However, even if awareness of possible changes exists, there is no guide how to make them. These changes depend mainly on the speaker’s communication skills, ability to improvise, empathy with the audience, intuition and quite often on common sense.

Just as the speaker expects a certain type of audience, the audience also expects something from the speaker. Every audience has a certain set of expectations when assuming the part of the receiver of a message. It is very important that the communicator is prepared to fulfil these expectations. When s/he succeeds to do so, successful communication occurs. Frequently these expectations do not focus only on the message, but on the whole communication process, this includes the communicator as a person (credibility, reputation, communication skills, etc.), the informational content to be delivered, the way in which the information is to be conveyed, the time interval in which the communicational transfer is to be made and many other aspects. If there is a significant difference between the audience’s expectations and the performance of the communicator, the communication process is damaged.
Consequently, one may ask about the benefits of analyzing the audience in professional communication. The answer is very simple, the chances of having successful professional communication increase when having an audience strategy. Getting and maintaining a certain professional reputation, gaining more money for the company, closing business deals successfully, and last but not least, personal satisfaction for the communicator that a message well delivered and well received is worth the time and the effort are only but a few of these benefits.

Still, the ideas presented so far focus mainly on how to identify the type of audience and to analyze the audience’s needs and expectations, but furthermore, professional must use this information in order to actually catch the audience’s attention. There are many useful strategies to be kept handy for any professional, knowing them and knowing how to use them, makes communication a step closer to reaching its ultimate gold, namely that to achieve informational transfer.

Even before coming in front of an audience, it is important for the speaker to have a good professional reputation. An audience is more likely to pay attention more carefully to someone who is considered a good professional, rather than to someone who has not earned such reputation. However, this element may be missing for various reasons: either that the communicator is a beginner and has no reputation at all, or s/he is not known to the audience. In which case, his/her task to catch the audience’s interest is even more difficult, the speaker has to convince the audience that s/he is well prepared, has good communication skills and excellent knowledge of the subject matter.

When actually referring to the oral delivery itself, all theoreticians agree on the fact that the first part of any presentation bears the utmost importance. The speaker needs to establish a rapport with his/her audience in the first few minutes of interaction. At pre-informational transfer stage, the speaker must make no mistake about all elements that are external to the informational content: choice of clothes, adopting the appropriate language and register, tone of voice and volume, frontal position, etc. These elements build a certain positive or
negative image and build the projection of the speaker’s identity. In the case in which the communicator fails to captivate the audience from the very beginning, it is very unlikely s/he may be able to do so at a later time, during message delivery itself. Therefore, orators are advised to begin in a positive note (with an amusing statement, a joke, a powerful affirmation or a provocative question), with something that is or is not connected with the topic itself. The audience does not only have an intellectual response to the presentation, but they also have an emotional response, therefore it is important to take into consideration both the emotional and the intellectual cues.

Another strategy to win the audience’s attention, which can be used alone, or in combination with the strategy presented in the preceding paragraph, is that of **motivating the audience**. Usually, this is done by explaining to the audience which the benefits for listening to the presentation are. From the very beginning, in oral communication, an audience is attending a presentation for a certain reason; however, this reason may not be a sufficiently good one to make them actually listen to the speech. This situation is more then often typical for professional communication, staff members have the obligation to attend various operational meetings, but they may have other more pressing problems to tend to, so, unless properly motivated, they may be unable to focus on the presentations which are part of that meeting. Still, when explicitly presented with the benefits of concentrating on a certain matter, the audience will be more aware of the importance of the presentation for them, consequently listening more carefully.

Assuming that the speaker manages to captivate the audience from the beginning it still leaves the problem of **keeping the audience alert and interested** for the rest of the presentation. At this point, excellent preparation on the part of the speaker is the best strategy. Everything counts at this stage: good knowledge of the subject matter, doubled by a good structure of the informational content and supported by good communication skills. The audience needs to be informed on the intentions of the speaker to deliver the information, and also to be informed about the whole duration of the presentation, why they are presented with certain information, how does it fit in
the main picture and where the presentation is heading. As long as all these elements are clear in the mind of the receivers, they are theoretically able to follow the unrevealing of information. For this purpose every the presentation is recommended contain visual aids and a coherent structure.

Another factor of utmost importance for the audience, and equally important for the speaker, is the **time interval** of the presentation. The two parties, the sender and the receiver have a certain time interval at their disposal, an interval which is mutually agreed upon. Any breach of this convention from the part of the speaker may result in a negative impact on the audience. The audience may become restless, lose interest and stop following the presentation, consequently communicational transfer of information fails. Moreover, the audience has a more positive attitude about presentations with a clear-cut structure, one that allows the public distinguish between: introduction, middle and end, so that they can approximate the time span for the remaining part of the presentation.

At actual stage of the oral delivery, the speaker plays an essential part in stimulating and captivating the audience’s attention. If, in the first part, the physical appearance is significant, for the duration of the delivery, other elements gain prominence. These elements refer only to the speaker and they are: a natural way of speaking, efficient and suggestive body language, permanent eye contact, showing confidence and demonstrating mastery of the subject. The way in which the communicator is able to use these elements works towards turning the group of receivers into a **passive or an active audience**. The difference between an active and a passive audience is most frequently the difference between an audience who follows the speaker and understands what is being presented, and an audience who is either bored or completely lost, unable to follow what is being delivered. For this reason the speaker must permanently check the audience and adjust the presentation in order to fit best the intellectual and emotional needs of the audience.

One of the most successful strategies is ‘**building interaction**’, as it is called by Tollefson & Peterson (2000). In order to permanently interact with the audience, the professional
can simply ask questions from time to time and check if the audience has been able to keep up with the delivered information. Even when working with smaller or larger audiences, this is possible by inviting everyone to share thoughts, opinions, etc. However, the communicator must be aware that this interaction, if not orderly contained, may cause disturbance, even chaos, at the general presentation level. The audience must be clearly guided when and how much interaction is allowed.

The business professional must be aware of the fact that, when making a presentation, s/he is in control, and when succeeding to catch, and even better, to captivate the group’s attention, s/he is receiving the audience’s gift for his/her efforts: a momentary surrender of control, a brief opportunity to inform, persuade and alter them. But this moment is not to be used abusively and unilaterally, even if the speaker delivers a message, the audience is also delivering one, in the form of the feedback. In our case, feedback is the totality of information received as reply to something that has been presented in front of an audience. The feedback is present from the beginning until the end of the oral input, but usually it is more subtly expressed during the delivery and more obvious after the presentation. It may take various forms, from signs of agitation to mesmerized facial expressions, from low voice commentaries to acclamations, from a simple praising word or statement to a vivacious set of applause. Feedback can be constantly checked in the audience’s gestures, body language, or when having eye contact, etc.

The most frequent type of feedback in professional communication is present under the form of questions at the end of the oral delivery. It is almost common knowledge that at the end of any presentation, the audience is allowed time to ask the speaker questions. This can be used as another strategy to stimulate the audience’s attention. When the speaker clearly states at the beginning of the presentation that s/he expects several questions at the end of the speech, s/he exerts pressure on the audience to pay attention to what is being said, as only those who follow the presentation, can ask relevant questions.
After the end of the presentation, the audience must be encouraged to ask questions, these questions need to get the answers containing clear and relevant explanations. The audience must be allowed time to assimilate and accept what has been said and then, according to the initial goal of the presentation, to make changes or to take appropriate measures. A positive note should be maintained during the feedback, just as during the presentation. Any professional presentation must end cordially for all the people who attended it, both the speaker and the members of the audience. A good level of satisfaction for the audience can be created by two strategies: by emphasizing the new things that have been worth their time and effort, and by thanking the audience for their attention and goodwill. Usually, both strategies are used in professional environment.

The aspects presented above have dealt with the main audience related problems, both from a theoretical and a practical point of view. They point out the fact that successful communication rarely takes place without careful audience identification and analysis. In addition, audience strategies should be well prepared before any presentation and should be adjusted while oral delivery occurs.

Audience’s needs and expectations must be investigated and fulfilled, as a passive audience must be turned into an active one. Building interaction and constantly checking audience response is crucial, and last but not least, keeping the audience positive and satisfied is of tremendous importance.

Finally, any professional must be conscious that even if the audience plays a considerable part when preparing and delivering a presentation, all the other elements constituting the process of communication are equally important. Only by paying attention to all aspects as a whole and to each one separately, successful transfer of information takes place.
References: