

Media Richness

Overview

The medium with which you send a message is just as important as the message's content, and when sending any message, it's critical to thoughtfully choose the most appropriate medium for the message in question. As such, when deciding which medium to use, it's important to first consider its "richness."

What is media richness? All communication media vary across two attributes: the opportunity they afford for feedback and the number of "cues" with which they communicate meaning. Communicative "cues" are the non-content attributes of a medium that receivers use to aid understanding. As an example, in face-to-face communication the receiver determines meaning not only by what the speaker is saying, but also by the look on their face, their tone of voice, their posture, and other factors. These additional factors are non-verbal communicative "cues," and all in all, the more cues a medium has the more "bandwidth" it affords in communicating meaning.

When you map communication media across their feedback and communicative cues, you can classify them on a continuum from "rich" to "lean" (as illustrated in the chart on the following page). Rich media have high opportunity for feedback and more cues; lean media have less opportunity for feedback and fewer cues. **Here's the key point: neither rich nor lean media are "better" than the other ... they're better at communicating different types of content:**

- **Rich media** are more effective at communicating complex messages, messages that must be highly persuasive, or messages that have a high level of uncertainty. This is because they afford the audience a greater opportunity to clarify uncertain issues and determine meaning from additional communicative cues. Further, because they have greater communicative "bandwidth," they afford the sender of a message a greater likelihood to communicate persuasively and credibly. Examples of rich media are face-to-face communication, speeches, or videoconferencing.
- **Lean Media** are more effective at communicating specific messages, messages that are routine, or messages that are more tactical. Because these messages are specific and relatively standard, they do not require feedback or extra communicative cues to facilitate understanding. Examples of lean media are internal surveys, posters, pay envelope inserts, email, or letters.


Guidelines

When selecting a medium for your message, use the following guidelines to make your decision:

- **The Need To Persuade:** Richer media provide more communicative cues than lean media, which increases persuasive effect. Accordingly, the more controversial a message or the greater the need to change audience beliefs, the richer the media should be.
- **The Need for Feedback/Clarity:** If the message is likely to cause confusion, it should utilize richer media (as they provide an opportunity to give feedback and answer questions).

- **Message Type:** Strategic information is more effectively communicated via rich media, as they provide more opportunity for the audience to provide feedback, ask questions, and clarify. Tactical information is generally better served by lean media because of their ability to provide a large number of details and a historical record.
- **Message Complexity:** More complex messages are better served by richer media, as they provide increased cues, feedback, and opportunity to generate clarity.

Media Richness Guide

Media	Richness	Effects		
Face-to-face		Messages that are more ...unique, uncertain, symbolic, strategic.		
Small groups				
Video conference				
Telephone				
Intranet/email				
Town halls				
Personal written documents				
Hotlines				
Videos				
Newsletters				
Formal unaddressed documents				
Formal external documents			More Lean	Messages that are more ... routine, certain, historical, tactical.