



New Genres for Communicating Evaluation Findings



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by:

David Scheie
Steven E. Mayer
Sharon Ramirez
Theartrice Williams

*Rainbow Research, Inc.
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621 West Lake Street
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55408
612.824.0724*

Introduction

If a tree falls in the forest but no one hears it, was there ever a sound? If an evaluator finds findings but no one notices them, was there ever an evaluation?

Evaluators are concerned that our findings be read and used. One specter that haunts us all is “the report that gathers dust on a shelf.”

At Rainbow Research we’ve become convinced over the years that the ways in which evaluation findings are served-up matter a great deal if we want our findings to be noticed and put to use. The packaging and timing of evaluation products, and the choices we make about how to carve-up our data into “findings,” are critical for increasing the communicating power of our findings.

In this paper we’d like to share some guidelines we use in designing our evaluation products. And we give three different examples of products we’ve created — new genres for communicating evaluation findings — that illustrate different ways of applying these principles.

The guidelines we follow for designing evaluation products that communicate powerfully are these:

1. Communicate to specific audiences.
2. Speak to specific applications.
3. Respect adult learning styles in your communications.
4. Package your product to compete successfully for the attention of your audience.

Communicate to Specific Audiences

It's critical to know who your audience is, and to what they'll be receptive. The more specifically you can picture the persons you're communicating with, the more effectively you'll be able to communicate with them.

Knowing your audience gives you vital clues to decide how much to emphasize your methods, your credentials, your findings, or your recommendations. It helps you figure out how to set up your points for maximum impact — whether unflattering findings can be delivered directly, or whether they'll have greater impact if coached more gently. It guides you in your choice of vocabulary, product length, and graphic appearance.

At Rainbow Research, our interest is in increasing the knowledge base of different fields of nonprofit endeavor. We typically want to communicate with at least two tiers of audience: the immediate client, and others interested in the issue that the evaluation is addressing. Indeed, in many of our projects an important audience is those other practitioners and supporters in an issue arena, in addition to those being evaluated or the program or evaluation sponsor.

For example, in a current project of ours evaluating 29 projects in which religious institutions are involved in housing or community economic development, our evaluation work is primarily supposed to inform other church people, community activists and funders now active in or considering getting involved in religious-community partnerships. Our reports are supposed to let these people know what they might expect from these kinds of partnerships, how to recognize good potential partners and how to build strong, effective partnerships.

In another project we recently finished — an evaluation of a community-based policing project — there were at least three tiers of audience. The innermost circle was the five people — four police officers, one staff member of a neighborhood organization — who were the staff of a community-based policing “team.” The next circle included others within the police department, other staff and resident leaders of the neighborhood organization, and people who lived and worked in the neighborhood where the project was active. A third circle, even wider, included people and citizen organizations, and police and other community-servicing agencies, in other neighborhoods both in Minneapolis and in other communities around the country. We wrote an interim report addressed primarily to the team and their

sponsoring institutions, with a detailed critique of the team's performance and recommendations for improving it. Our final report, intended for the wider audience, toted up the accomplishments of the pilot project and articulated the essential elements of a community-based policing model for replication in other neighborhoods.

Speak to Specific Applications

If we want the results of our work to be used, it's important that we envision in advance the uses in which our audiences are interested. Will it be primarily to persuade someone that an opportunity or problem deserves action? Or to persuade someone that a certain approach or program is the right kind of action for the opportunity? Or is the most important use of our findings to help people know which kinds of action are likely to be most effective in dealing with a social opportunity or problem?

We at Rainbow Research tend to favor the third application: giving people tools to take action. Therefore most of our products, including the three examples we'll be describing today, are loaded up with lots of pointers on "what works."

Respect Adult Learning Styles

There are three principles of adult learning that we keep in mind when communicating our findings.

First, adults are most interested in information that is directly relevant to the projects and problems they're dealing with in their own lives.

Second, they're most likely to use information that resonates with their own real experience.

Third, different people learn in different ways — some are more visually-oriented, others prefer narrative text, and some learn best when they hear something instead of reading it.

Recognizing the problem-solving bent of most adult readers, our products typically include guidelines, lessons, specifically actionable recommendations, as well as descriptions of results or processes.

We present our findings in a style that includes many access points, for the reader who's likely to pick up and put down our document many times. We recognize that most adults don't approach their work-related reading in a leisurely fashion. They don't have large blocs of time available to digest a publication. More commonly, they have a few minutes here and there; or they'll turn to a book or paper or report when they have a specific question that they want to answer.

Therefore, we write in many brief sections and subsections, with lots of clear, straightforward titles. We include bulleted key points as well as conventional paragraphs, illustrative anecdotes as well as statements of finding. We look for ways to depict our findings or lessons pictorially, in charts and graphs or figures, as well as with text. Our longer reports always have summaries, for that huge majority of readers that are not likely to take time for the full report.

We mix our didactic, directive stuff — our guidelines or recommendations to do this or do that — with evidence and anecdotal descriptions from our research. The anecdotes present real-life experiences that can resonate with the readers' own experience, and allows readers to draw their own conclusions, for their own situations, which may be slightly different from the conclusions we've drawn.

Package Your Product to Compete for Attention

In this information-rich society, you need to compete for the attention of your audience. Part of this involves respecting their learning styles, and speaking to their experience and their current situation.

Another part of this involves presenting an appearance that will hook the curiosity of your audience and incline them to take your product seriously.

At Rainbow Research we think through many graphic design decisions: what paper stock, what type fonts, whether to use colors. We use cover art and other graphics when we can afford it.

We try to package our stuff so that its appearance is compatible with, and a little more attractive than, the other stuff likely to be in the in-boxes of our readers. And when our products are going “cold-calling,” as it were — when a document is being sent out to someone who doesn’t already know us and our work — we sometimes send it out with a cover letter from someone who’s likely to be respected by the reader.

Three Examples

Let me describe three of our products that act out these principles in different ways. They’re distinctive genres, yet each is based on an appraisal of who its audience is, what the audience’s actionable interests are, how the audience is likely to learn, and how to compete successfully for the attention of its audience. One is a guidebook; one is a series of magazines; and the third is an article that was published in someone else’s publication.

Supporting Low Income Neighborhood Organizations: A Guide for Community Foundations

This guidebook, affectionately known as SLINO, was the major evaluation product of a five-year program. In the Community Foundations and Neighborhoods Small Grants Program, sponsored by the C. S. Mott Foundation, eight small community foundations around the country began or enlarged programs of grantmaking and other support to low income neighborhood groups in their communities. We were the evaluators of the program, which initially ran from 1984 to 1989.

More than presenting results of the program, the guidebook communicates “lessons learned” and “best practices” discovered by these eight foundations over these five years. It’s intended to give both “why to” and “how to” guidance on supporting neighborhood self-help. It’s intended to generate action — to entice more foundations and other institutions to support neighborhood self-help initiatives, and to show them ways of supporting that have been found to be effective.

Its primary audience is foundation staff and board members. To compete for their attention, we gave *SLINO* a graphic appearance that fit nicely with foundations’

annual reports and other documents that might be found lying on coffee tables in foundations offices:

- glossy paper
- photos
- two colors of ink

We wanted the appearance to communicate professionalism, permanence, credibility. To reinforce this impression, the initial copies we sent out to community foundations carried a cover letter from the Mott Foundation on Mott's letterhead — and Mott is well-known among community foundations as generous supporter of their efforts.

SLINO responds to the adult learner by offering many different entry points for the busy reader (or skimmer). It's broken into chapters and sections and many bulleted pointers. Examples and illustrations from the eight foundations' experience are presented in boxes interspersed with the text, so that a reader who prefers cases to didactic learning can easily jump from one example to the next. The boxes are further set-off by having a different type font and a green border.

As a "how to" reference intended for repeated consultation during program planning and operations, the book is designed to let someone easily flip through it and find a specific topic. Chapter titles appear on each page, and subheads appear frequently. The table of contents is printed on two facing pages to give an overview of the entire contents in one glance.

SLINO proved to be popular not just with community foundations but with other institutions with a stake in healthy neighborhoods — government agencies, church-affiliated groups, corporate community affairs offices, university urban affairs centers and other neighborhood intermediaries.

As a blueprint for effective neighborhood support work *SLINO* made it easy for the Mott Foundation to undertake a second round of the Community Foundations and Neighborhoods Program — pumping an additional \$4 million into the program and drawing an additional 17 community foundations into working with neighborhoods.

***CF: Findings from the Leadership Program
for Community Foundations***

The central product of our evaluation work with the Leadership Program for Community Foundations, sponsored by the Ford and MacArthur Foundations, is a series of annual magazines. Modeled on *Inc.* (“the magazine for growing small businesses”), *CF* intends to communicate “the experiences of rapidly growing community foundations” to others that wish to grow. Its purpose is to bolster the good work that the foundations in this program are doing, and to spread good ideas throughout the worlds of philanthropy and community leadership.

Graphically and in its layout *CF* shares many of the features of *SLINO*, discussed previously — because they’re both trying to command the attention of the same audience.

It’s slick, glossy, colorful (in fact, we’ve wondered if it might almost be too glossy — will the person who opens the mail toss it with the junk mail?) — the kind of thing that staff are proud to show to board members, and that board members will share with friends.

CF has many different entry points for the reader — multiple articles, sections with subheads, sidebars, charts and tables. Again, its audience is people who have many other stimuli competing for their attention; people who are likely to pick it up and put it down several times; active adults who want tools for moving ahead in their own problem solving and goal pursuits.

A key difference between *CF* and *SLINO* is that with *CF* we’re not waiting until the end of a five-year program to spread our findings around. We’re coming out annually as findings emerge.

You might call *CF* an uptown version of the “working papers” genre. This strategy comes out of an analysis of the audience: community foundations are the hottest thing going in philanthropy right now, the fastest growing part of the foundation field. The whole Leadership Program reflects this, as well as wanting to contribute to this phenomenon. So we want to strike while the iron is hot.

***Helping Rural Communities:
A Role for Universities?***

Our final example is fairly simple: an article placed in someone else's journal. Yet we think it has some features that recommend it to evaluators who want to extend the impact of their work.

The article is called "Helping Rural Communities Pursue Economic Development: A Role for Universities?" It presents what we learned in a three-year study of pilot projects in three states where selected universities and colleges sought to improve their assistance to rural community development efforts. It appeared not in an evaluation journal, but in *Northwest Report*, the newsletter of the Northwest Area Foundation.

As an example of a useful genre for communicating evaluation findings, let us point out these features.

First, the article appeared in a journal with a fairly large circulation — around 7,000. This means our findings are getting out to a much larger audience than through other channels that we more commonly use. For example, in our 15-plus years, of the publications that we've distributed ourselves, none have gone out to that many people; only one has disseminated more than 2,000 copies.

Second, this journal's audience is a fairly high-powered mix of practitioners, policy-makers, funders and researchers across the eight state region served by the Northwest Area Foundation. Compared to an academic journal or a general-interest magazine, we suspect that this readership includes a higher proportion of people likely to *do* something with what they read.

People who read a foundation's newsletter often are looking for clues to what they might do that would attract funding from that foundation. In other words, they're looking for ideas that they can put into action. So we believe it's an excellent audience to reach if we want our findings to be acted upon.

Writing in this genre meant we did some things differently than if we were putting our own report.

First, we focused almost entirely on our findings and recommendations, with almost no description of methods. Methods sections are of interest to other researchers — but they comprised a relatively small portion of this newsletter’s audience. Methods descriptions are also included when the evaluation’s credibility needs to be established.

In this case, the publication sponsor — a large private foundation — provided the credibility and authority for our findings. Because our article appeared in the foundation’s newsletter, our findings were cloaked in the foundation’s authority and credibility. Foundations tend to be accorded more “objectivity” and “neutrality” than many other institutions — they don’t need to “sell papers” the way mass media do. And for those who believe (as we do) that no institutions are objective or neutral, the article still commanded attention by the fact that it had the seal of approval of a foundation that backs up its convictions with millions of dollars of grants per year.

Second — and this is another reason why we dispensed with traditional science-reporting of methods in favor of a focus on actionable recommendations — when writing for a newsletter there’s a premium on brevity. This medium does not give much space to anything, so you really have to boil your research results down to the essentials.

This is a valuable exercise for discovering just how much verbal language you can get along without. We knew that this article would be the primary product of this evaluation, so when we wrote the final report that was the basis of the article we worked hard to make it as brief and succinct as possible. Still, when the newsletter editor adapted the report for the newsletter, she cut its length by a third or so without cutting any meat out!

The lesson: a skilled editor can be a powerful resource for streamlining evaluation findings.

Conclusion

For evaluators that want their work to make a difference, it’s not enough to apply appropriate research methods with high standards of rigor. That’s the beginning of

effective evaluation practice. Beyond that we need to be strategic about how to communicate our findings for maximum impact.

The board of directors at Rainbow Research — we're a nonprofit organization — has challenged us on staff to keep experimenting on this frontier of communication genres. They consider it one of the most important frontiers along which we can better perform our mission of helping communities and organizations respond more effectively to social problems and community-building opportunities.

We've invested a lot of time over the last year building up a mailing list database of several thousand names to whom we can send publications or announcements of publications. We've just produced our first publications catalog, which we're sending far and wide to let people know about what's available from Rainbow Research.

We're brainstorming about additional genres that might communicate effectively, too. Ideas that we've mentioned include comic books, skits, and videos. We're wondering how to make better use of music and color.

In short, we're trying to insure that when we fell trees in the forest of evaluation, they are heard, seen, smelled, touched, or somehow noticed and remembered!

Our mission is to help increase the effectiveness and impact of socially concerned organizations in responding to social problems. We work in support of organizations and communities to help them achieve their goals.

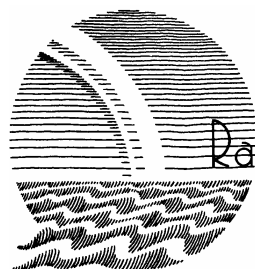
Your organization and community can experience these results from participation in Rainbow Research activities – tailored studies, workshops, and partnerships – and use of our tools and publications.

We can help you to:

- Improve your understanding** of key program elements that contribute to program effectiveness.
- Improve program impact** through integrating principles of program effectiveness into day-to-day operations.
- Improve management** of resources to achieve program purposes.
- Improve the fit** between your organization's activities and your community's needs and opportunities.
- Improve commitment** of staff and Board to your organization's mission.
- Improve communication** between your organization and its various stakeholders and publics.
- Improve linkages** between your organization and other like-minded organizations.
- Improve access** to tools and support services that strengthen program performance.

Related Rainbow Research Publications:

- **Guide to Conducting Focus Group Research;** by Becky Swanson Kroll. *38 pages (1995); #172 - \$5.00*
- **Common Barriers to Effectiveness in the Independent Sector;** by Steven E. Mayer. *6 pages (1992); #308 - \$5.00*
- **Growth Factors in the Development of Community Foundation: A Study Guide for Technical Assistance;** by Steven E. Mayer; *53 pages (1988); #082 – \$15.00*
- **The Assets Model of Community Development;** by Steven E. Mayer; *9 pages (1992); #301 - \$5.00*



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