

A woman in a dark suit stands on the deck of the Titanic, gesturing towards a massive iceberg in the ocean. The iceberg is a large, jagged mass of white ice, partially submerged. The woman is seen from the side, her hands raised as if explaining something. The ocean is dark and choppy, and the sky is a pale blue.

Communication Tips From the Titanic

By Calvin Sun, Principal, Calvin Sun & Associates

Most people, when they think of the *Titanic*, think of tragedy. They think about icebergs, the lifeboats or the band. Rarely, though, do they think about *Titanic* in terms of business communications.

For a number of years, I have studied the *Titanic*. A few years ago, while running my consulting and training programs on customer service, I thought about incorporating stories from the disaster into my presentations. As someone once said, "Those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it."

What can the *Titanic* teach us about communications? Here are some examples:

The Interrupted Warning

Wireless operator Jack Phillips couldn't have received the message at a worse time. Here he was, working with a lighthouse at Cape Race, Newfoundland, processing other messages to and from the *Titanic* passengers. Now, this bothersome ship was trying to contact him, and because they were so close, its signal hurt his ears. In irritation, he replied to them, "Shut up, I'm working Cape Race!"

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Little did he know that the message he cut off was warning him of icebergs.

No one suggests, of course, that this missed warning is the sole reason the ship sank. Still, it most certainly played a factor. What can we learn from this incident?

Be careful about interrupting people. Technical support lines irritate me for

this reason. I call with a computer problem, and while I'm talking, they either start describing a solution or they transfer me to someone else. That

kind of behavior will irritate people. Try to hear everything they say.

Also, to ensure that you are listening correctly, try to get involved with what the other person is telling you, by paraphrasing or otherwise reacting. You will strengthen your own understanding, plus the other person will react positively.

The Nurse Who Failed to Tell

Riding in first class, the Allison family of Montreal awoke after the collision. Husband and father Hudson Allison, an investment banker, was traveling with his wife, Bess, and their two children: three-year-old Loraine and one-year-old Trevor. Also traveling with them was their nurse, Alice Cleaver.

Without explanation, Alice suddenly took Trevor and left the stateroom. She and Trevor later entered a lifeboat, which was lowered from the ship. Hudson, Bess and Loraine, however, not knowing this fact, spent the rest of the time looking in vain for Trevor. Bess and Loraine, in fact, turned down at least one chance to enter a lifeboat. As a result, they all died when the ship sank, with Loraine the only first class child to perish.

Failing to keep people informed, especially if they are your customers or members, can kill your reputation for customer service. If you're a professional, such as an attorney or physician, failure to keep clients informed could constitute malpractice. If you have bad news, letting them know earlier

gives them time to prepare and adjust. Even better, try to set their expectations beforehand, so when bad news *does* arise (and it will), it will be less of a shock.

The Insensitive Letter

All of the band members perished when the *Titanic* sank. The father of one of them, violinist John Law Hume (whose body was recovered and is buried in Halifax, Nova Scotia) received a letter shortly after the sinking. The letter came from the company that managed the band, and it requested payment for the younger Hume's band uniform.

Things we say and do may sound perfectly reasonable to us, but can "rub others the wrong way." For example, as you may know, Chinese is a highly tonal language. The same sound, said in a different tone, has a different meaning. If I say the sound "ma" in a high level tone, I am addressing my mother in law. However, if I say that sound in a falling and rising tone, I'm calling her a horse. Therefore, be careful and think before you speak.

Following these tips can improve your communications, both personally and professionally. ♦

Calvin Sun is the Principal of Calvin Sun & Associates. He specializes in consulting with and training companies on improving their communications and customer service. He has spoken at numerous conferences on this topic, has authored several articles about the Titanic, and has interviewed the relatives, descendants and representatives of seven passengers. Sun holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Haverford College, a Master of Business Administration from the Wharton School and is currently attending Temple University Beasley School of Law. Sun was a keynote speaker at the Association's 2005 Fall Leadership Conference and will also be speaking at the 2006 Annual Convention & Exposition in May. He can be reached at 610-296-3947 or via e-mail at csun@calvinsun.com.