

The Essential Theories of Business Communication

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Abstract

We asked editorial board members of major business communication journals to rate seventy-eight theories widely used in business communication research on four aspects: how knowledgeable they were about the theory, the theory's application to business activities, the theory's scientific support, and how important the theory was to the field as a whole. From these ratings, we classified the theories into core (theories rated highly in all four areas), major (theories rated highly in two or three areas), focused (theories rated highly in one area), and the rest as notable. By making knowledge about these theories more explicit, we hope to create a dialogue that will help the field of business communication become more united and able to advance more rapidly in its research processes.

What is business communication? This question is difficult to answer because of business communication's vast scope – a scope only surpassed by the value business communication adds to organizations. Business communication topics range from writing memos, to leaders inspiring followers, to how cultures are co-created, to the creation of self through work interchanges. And our field's varied perspectives reflect this broad intellectual horizon. Annette Shelby (1993) identified multiple, major areas within our field – each with different goals, methodologies, and worldviews. These rich, diverse views create a vibrant – if loosely tied – community that investigates the multitude of phenomena we call business communication (Fort, 1975). But such fragmentation also stunts our field's growth (Kuhn, 1996), hinders our acceptance by other business and social science researchers, and limits how (financially) valued business communication professors are in universities (Abbott, 2014).

How can we reduce this fragmentation and still preserve our field's richness? We believe making these divergent perspectives explicit and easily accessible is key. A shared worldview binds people together – be they friends, work colleagues, or members of an academic community (Brodie, 2011; Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). Case in point: within academic communities, theories help forge members' identities, even when vast distances and long years separate these members (Kuhn, 1996; Latour, 2005). Theory underlies the research in which we immerse ourselves and underpin the texts from which we teach. These same theories offer a compass to all members in our community: a guide for researchers seeking robust, well-supported frameworks for examining phenomena in the field; for teachers crafting pedagogy based on useful and well-understood principles; for writers looking to develop texts grounded in our field's best practices; and for consultants trying to benefit the work force.

Yet in business communication these theories remain covert. The catalog of our basic, fundamental theories only exists as tacit knowledge, accessible through limited networks of friends, colleagues, and research reports (Latour, 2005). Such implicit knowledge needs to be made explicit – a source available to our field's members for discussion, debate, and change (Mayfield, 2010). The very nature of implicit knowledge, however, makes identifying the theories challenging. Different researchers know some theories better than others, different texts are built around diverse research, and different business communication experts find some models more useful than others. Still, other business disciplines – notably organizational behavior (Miner, 2003) and organizational theory (Miles, 2012) – have faced similar challenges and successfully identified core theories relevant to diverse researchers across these fields.

Uncovering the Essential Theories

To address this issue, we started by making a list of prominent, well-established business communication theories. To find these theories, we examined major business communication books, journals, and websites. We next identified the theories that repeatedly appeared: a signal of their importance and a guard against idiosyncratic selection. This process uncovered 78 distinct theories. After theory identification, we solicited 269 editorial board members from four highly rated business communication journals to serve as expert raters for these theories (see Appendix A for a list of these journals). Of those solicited, 70 agreed. These experts were asked to rate the theories on four criteria: knowledge of a theory (Knowledge), how well the theory can be applied to business settings (Application), how scientifically supported the theory is (Scientific Support), and how important the theory is to the field of business communication (Importance). For rating purposes, the experts were given the theories' most commonly used names, any alternative theory names, a brief description of each theory, major researchers associated with the theories, and major publications about the theories. The judges were asked to rate only the theories with which they were familiar. Equally important, we gave the raters an opportunity to nominate and evaluate up to five business communication theories not included through our initial theory identification. Only five people made nominations, only one theory appeared more than once, and one theory was mentioned twice. From this feedback, we believe that our initial survey of business communication theories was an adequate canvassing of essential business communication theories.

We used the judges' ratings to classify the theories into four categories: notable, focused, major, and core. For categorizing the theories, we first averaged all raters' theory scores for each theory across all four areas. Then, we classified each area as high or low for each theory. Theories classified as high in an area had scores at or above the median for that area. If the score was below the median, it was classified as low in that area. For example, the Knowledge score for the Multimodality theory (Kress, 2010) was 1.11 (below that area's median score) and so this theory was rated as low for knowledge of the theory. However, the theory's score for Application was 2.83 (above the median score for that area) and so was rated high in that area.

The classification decision rules are as follows: core theories were those rated highly (equal to or above the median score) in all four areas; major theories were rated highly in two or three areas; focused theories were rated highly in one area; and notable theories were the remaining theories. Even when a theory received all low scores, we considered them as *notable* because they were prominent in multiple sources. While they may have scored lower than other theories, they still were recognized by at least 10% of our judges, which was more than any theory nominated by the judges as additional theories. As such, we concluded that notable theories should still be considered as essential to our field.

Figure 1 provides a Venn diagram of the theories' overlap among the different areas.

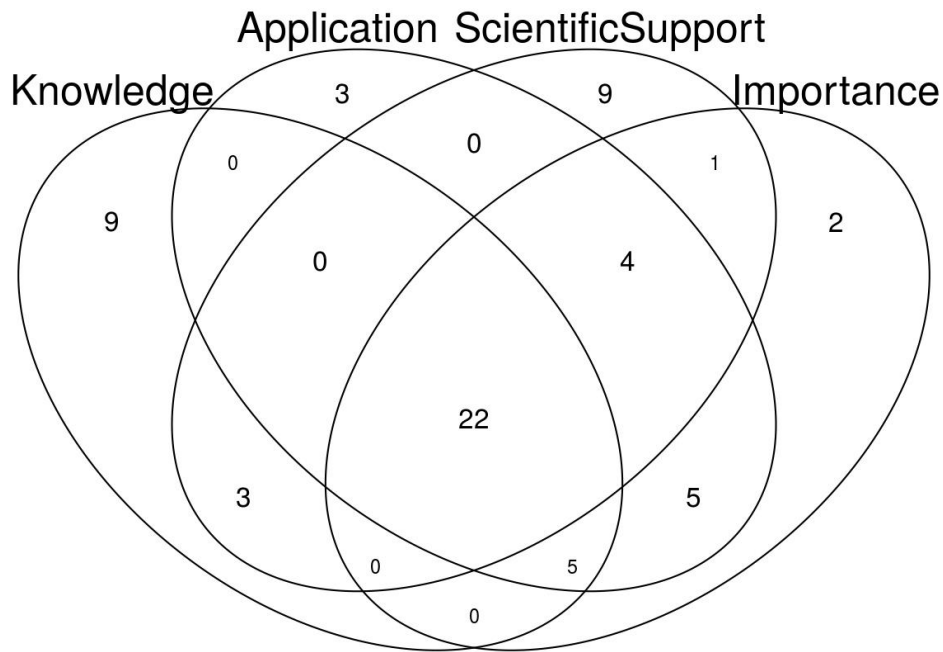


Figure 1. A Venn diagram of overlapping areas among the essential theories of business communication.

The classification of specific theories is presented in tables 1 to 5. Table 1 presents the core theories – those highly rated in all four areas. These theories present a mix of purposes and include grand theories (such as Social Constructionism), training and pedagogy directed (such as Communication Apprehension and Communication Competence), organizational level theories (such as Diffusion of Innovations Theory), and individual focused theories (such as Organizational Identification and Politeness theories).

Table 1
Essential Theories: Core Theories

Theory Name	Group	Knowledge	Application	Scientific Support	Importance
Communication Apprehension	Core Theory	1.46	2.81	2.88	2.56
Communication Competence	Core Theory	1.79	3.11	2.80	2.94
Conversation Analysis	Core Theory	1.73	2.74	2.89	2.55
Critical Theory of Communication Approach to Organizations	Core Theory	1.42	2.88	2.85	2.92
Cultural Approach to Organizations	Core Theory	1.97	3.06	2.90	3.00
Diffusion of Innovations Theory	Core Theory	1.25	2.88	2.71	2.75

Theory Name	Group	Knowledge	Application	Scientific Support	Importance
Discourse Analysis	Core Theory	2.40	3.17	3.05	3.23
Ethnomethodology and Ethnography	Core Theory	2.18	3.03	2.92	2.95
Face Negotiation	Core Theory	1.73	2.93	2.79	2.76
Framing	Core Theory	1.99	3.39	2.86	3.19
Groupthink	Core Theory	2.12	2.89	2.79	2.95
Impression Management	Core Theory	1.76	2.83	2.66	2.70
Interpretive School of Communication	Core Theory	1.40	2.88	2.64	2.85
Narrative Theory	Core Theory	2.06	3.03	2.62	2.89
Organizational Identification	Core Theory	1.59	3.04	3.00	3.04
Politeness Theory	Core Theory	1.87	2.82	2.75	2.68
Rhetorical Theory	Core Theory	2.18	3.05	2.75	2.92
Sense Making	Core Theory	1.99	3.21	2.83	3.12
Social Constructionism	Core Theory	2.50	2.93	2.67	2.81
Source Credibility	Core Theory	1.25	2.86	2.65	2.68
Stucturation Theory	Core Theory	1.80	2.78	2.70	2.78
Theory of Communication Networks	Core Theory	1.66	3.03	3.03	2.97

Table 2 shows the major theories – those rated highly in two or three areas. These theories tended to be application oriented with all but four of the theories being rated highly in that area. Also, only Speech Acts Theory might be considered a grand theory, with the rest being firmly middle-range theories (Bourgeois, 1979).

Table 2
Major Theories

Theory Name	Group	Knowledge	Application	Scientific Support	Importance
Enactment Theory	Application & Importance	0.94	2.88	2.45	2.59
Motivating Language Theory	Application & Importance	0.76	2.77	2.50	2.73
Multimodality	Application & Importance	1.11	2.83	2.61	2.86
Open Communication and Teamwork	Application & Importance	1.09	2.76	2.42	2.75

Theory Name	Group	Knowledge	Application	Scientific Support	Importance
Strategic Messaging	Application & Importance	0.91	3.25	2.25	2.94
Adaptive Structuration Theory	Application, Scientific Support, & Importance	1.07	2.71	2.71	2.52
Employee Voice and Silence	Application, Scientific Support, & Importance	1.01	3.05	2.71	2.85
Organizational Information Theory	Application, Scientific Support, & Importance	0.93	2.80	2.68	2.70
Social Information Processing	Application, Scientific Support, & Importance	0.93	3.00	2.82	2.80
Coordinated Management of Meaning	Knowledge, Application, & Importance	1.16	2.77	2.56	2.59
English for Special Purposes	Knowledge, Application, & Importance	1.21	2.67	2.43	2.67
Functional Perspective on Group Decision Making	Knowledge, Application, & Importance	1.17	2.88	2.48	2.67
High-Context vs. Low-Context Culture	Knowledge, Application, & Importance	2.42	2.79	2.40	2.74
Media Richness Theory	Knowledge, Application, & Importance	1.85	3.00	2.57	2.89
Attribution Theory	Knowledge, & Scientific Support	1.71	2.59	2.75	2.47
Cognitive Dissonance	Knowledge, & Scientific Support	2.13	2.35	3.02	2.30
Speech Act Theory	Knowledge, & Scientific Support	2.23	2.49	2.63	2.42
Interpersonal Ties	Scientific Support, & Importance	0.74	2.53	2.64	2.53

Table 3 presents the focused theories. These theories were rated highly in one area, and represents a mix of different types of theories. The two major areas represented in this group was Knowledge and Scientific Support.

Table 3
Focused Theories

Theory Name	Group	Knowledge	Application	Scientific Support	Importance
Communication Pattern Theory	Application	1.03	2.74	2.25	2.45
Genderlect Theory	Application	0.70	2.79	2.25	2.50
Social Context of Communication	Application	0.94	2.85	2.56	2.50
Dialogic Public Relations Theory	Importance	0.67	2.64	2.45	2.64
Social Influence Theory	Importance	0.92	2.45	2.56	2.53
Agenda Setting Theory	Knowledge	1.31	2.13	2.54	2.00
Actor-Network Theory	Knowledge	1.25	2.62	2.48	2.50
Communication and Accommodation Theory	Knowledge	1.39	2.53	2.61	2.39
Constructivism	Knowledge	1.74	2.35	2.46	2.28
Dialogic Theory	Knowledge	1.65	2.66	2.54	2.46
Dramaturgical Theory	Knowledge	1.35	2.44	2.21	2.36
Information Theories	Knowledge	2.11	2.05	2.33	1.93
Symbolic Interactionism	Knowledge	1.51	2.43	2.52	2.41
Uncertainty Reduction Initial Interaction Theory	Knowledge	1.22	2.26	2.27	2.30
Attraction Selection Attrition Framework	Scientific Support	0.36	2.29	2.67	2.29
Elaboration Likelihood Model	Scientific Support	1.13	2.57	2.65	2.33
Expectancy Violations Theory	Scientific Support	0.92	2.47	2.69	2.22
Interpersonal Deception Theory	Scientific Support	0.57	2.14	2.73	2.07
Regulatory Focus Theory	Scientific Support	0.16	2.33	3.00	2.33
Semantic Network	Scientific Support	0.93	2.32	2.72	2.23
Social Penetration Theory	Scientific Support	1.02	2.32	2.67	2.15
Speech Codes Theory	Scientific Support	0.94	2.37	2.62	2.00
Uses and Gratification Approach	Scientific Support	1.00	1.95	2.65	1.71

Finally, Table 4 presents the notable theories. These theories demonstrated enough use by researchers to be included in the list of essential theories, although their relative scores in the four areas were low. Also, several of the theories are more widely used outside of business communication (such as Media Naturalness (Kock, Verville, & Garza, 2007) and Memetics (Brodie, 2011)) or have business communication attributes, but do not have communication as a central focus of the theory (such as Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011)).

Table 4
Notable Theories

Theory Name	Group	Knowledge	Application	Scientific Support	Importance
Activity Theory	Notable Theory	0.89	2.60	2.44	2.40
Business English as Lingua Franca	Notable Theory	1.09	2.38	2.47	2.38
Competing Values Framework	Notable Theory	0.99	2.38	2.33	2.36
Contagion Theory	Notable Theory	0.80	2.35	2.62	2.24
Homophily-Proximity Theories	Notable Theory	0.46	2.08	2.60	2.18
Interaction Analysis	Notable Theory	1.12	2.59	2.54	2.41
Media Naturalness	Notable Theory	0.26	2.17	2.33	2.17
Media Synchronicity Theory	Notable Theory	0.52	2.36	2.44	2.36
Memetics	Notable Theory	0.66	2.21	2.25	2.08
Rhetorical Sensitivity Model	Notable Theory	0.70	2.40	2.00	2.20
Social Judgment Theory	Notable Theory	1.00	2.33	2.29	2.36
Social Presence Theory	Notable Theory	0.91	2.45	2.21	2.35
Spiral of Silence	Notable Theory	0.64	2.12	2.42	2.14
Symbolic Convergence	Notable Theory	1.04	2.15	2.05	1.90
Theory of Reasoned Action	Notable Theory	0.98	2.28	2.44	2.22

Appendix B presents an alphabetical list of the theories, and Table 5 presents summary statistics for the theory areas.

Table 5.
Summary Statistics for Each Evaluation Area

Area	Minimum	1 st Quartile	Median	Mean	3 rd Quartile	Maximum
Knowledge	0.20	1.17	1.43	1.61	2.16	3.13
Application	1.95	2.37	2.66	2.64	2.88	3.39
Scientific Support	2.00	2.45	2.62	2.59	2.73	3.05
Importance	1.71	2.31	2.51	2.53	2.78	3.23

Each area was rated on a five-point scale from 0 (lowest) to 4 (highest).

Conclusions and Future Paths

From this work, we hope to create a dialogue that makes our community stronger, more vibrant, more cohesive, and better able to advance research while addressing the needs of contemporary organizations. We sincerely hope that this endeavor provides a useful guide for research, teaching and consulting; a guide that our community members can use to access the theories that work best for their needs. But we also hope the discussion does not end with this preliminary list. New theories emerge over time, current theories require change, and theories can even cease to be useful and need to be replaced (Fort, 1975; Kuhn, 1996; Miner, 2005a, 2005b). So may this list start a dialogue that engages and strengthens our community (Barthes, 1972).

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Appendix A

Journals Where Editorial Board Members Were Solicited

Business and Professional Communication Quarterly

Management Communication Quarterly

Journal of Business and Technical Communication

International Journal of Business Communication

Appendix B

Alphabetical List of Theories, Groupings, and Ratings

Theory Name	Group	Knowledge	Application	Scientific Support	Importance
Activity Theory	Notable Theory	0.89	2.60	2.44	2.40
Adaptive Structuration Theory	Major Theory: Application, Scientific Support, & Importance	1.07	2.71	2.71	2.52
Agenda Setting Theory	Focused Theory: Knowledge	1.31	2.13	2.54	2.00
ANT	Focused Theory: Knowledge	1.25	2.62	2.48	2.50
Attraction Selection Attrition Framework	Focused Theory: Scientific Support	0.36	2.29	2.67	2.29
Attribution Theory	Major Theory: Knowledge, & Scientific Support	1.71	2.59	2.75	2.47
Business English as Lingua Franca	Notable Theory	1.09	2.38	2.47	2.38
Cognitive Dissonance	Major Theory: Knowledge, & Scientific Support	2.13	2.35	3.02	2.30
Communication and Accommodation Theory	Focused Theory: Knowledge	1.39	2.53	2.61	2.39
Communication Apprehension	Core Theory	1.46	2.81	2.88	2.56
Communication Competence	Core Theory	1.79	3.11	2.80	2.94
Communication Pattern Theory	Focused Theory: Application	1.03	2.74	2.25	2.45
Competing Values Framework	Notable Theory	0.99	2.38	2.33	2.36
Constructivism	Focused Theory: Knowledge	1.74	2.35	2.46	2.28
Contagion Theory	Notable Theory	0.80	2.35	2.62	2.24
Conversation Analysis	Core Theory	1.73	2.74	2.89	2.55
Coordinated Management of Meaning	Major Theory: Knowledge, Application, & Importance	1.16	2.77	2.56	2.59

Theory Name	Group	Knowledge	Application	Scientific Support	Importance
Critical Theory of Communication Approach to Organizations	Core Theory	1.42	2.88	2.85	2.92
Cultural Approach to Organizations	Core Theory	1.97	3.06	2.90	3.00
Dialogic Public Relations Theory	Focused Theory: Importance	0.67	2.64	2.45	2.64
Dialogic Theory	Focused Theory: Knowledge	1.65	2.66	2.54	2.46
Diffusion of innovations Theory	Core Theory	1.25	2.88	2.71	2.75
Discourse Analysis	Core Theory	2.40	3.17	3.05	3.23
Dramaturgical Theory	Focused Theory: Knowledge	1.35	2.44	2.21	2.36
Elaboration Likelihood Model	Focused Theory: Scientific Support	1.13	2.57	2.65	2.33
Employee Voice and Silence	Major Theory: Application, Scientific Support, & Importance	1.01	3.05	2.71	2.85
Enactment Theory	Major Theory: Application & Importance	0.94	2.88	2.45	2.59
English for Special Purposes	Major Theory: Knowledge, Application, & Importance	1.21	2.67	2.43	2.67
Ethnomethodology and Ethnography	Core Theory	2.18	3.03	2.92	2.95
Expectancy Violations Theory	Focused Theory: Scientific Support	0.92	2.47	2.69	2.22
Face Negotiation	Core Theory	1.73	2.93	2.79	2.76
Framing	Core Theory	1.99	3.39	2.86	3.19
Functional Perspective on Group Decision Making	Major Theory: Knowledge, Application, & Importance	1.17	2.88	2.48	2.67
Genderlect Theory	Focused Theory: Application	0.70	2.79	2.25	2.50
Groupthink	Core Theory	2.12	2.89	2.79	2.95

Theory Name	Group	Knowledge	Application	Scientific Support	Importance
High Context vs. Low Context Culture	Major Theory: Knowledge, Application, & Importance	2.42	2.79	2.40	2.74
Homophily Proximity Theories	Notable Theory	0.46	2.08	2.60	2.18
Impression Management	Core Theory	1.76	2.83	2.66	2.70
Information Theories	Focused Theory: Knowledge	2.11	2.05	2.33	1.93
Interaction Analysis	Notable Theory	1.12	2.59	2.54	2.41
Interpersonal Deception Theory	Focused Theory: Scientific Support	0.57	2.14	2.73	2.07
Interpersonal Ties	Major Theory: Scientific Support, & Importance	0.74	2.53	2.64	2.53
Interpretive School of Communication	Core Theory	1.40	2.88	2.64	2.85
Media Naturalness	Notable Theory	0.26	2.17	2.33	2.17
Media Richness Theory	Major Theory: Knowledge, Application, & Importance	1.85	3.00	2.57	2.89
Media Synchronicity Theory	Notable Theory	0.52	2.36	2.44	2.36
Memetics	Notable Theory	0.66	2.21	2.25	2.08
Motivating Language Theory	Major Theory: Application & Importance	0.76	2.77	2.50	2.73
Multimodality	Major Theory: Application & Importance	1.11	2.83	2.61	2.86
Narrative Theory	Core Theory	2.06	3.03	2.62	2.89
Open Communication and Teamwork	Major Theory: Application & Importance	1.09	2.76	2.42	2.75
Organizational Identification	Core Theory	1.59	3.04	3.00	3.04
Organizational Information Theory	Major Theory: Application, Scientific Support, & Importance	0.93	2.80	2.68	2.70
Politeness Theory	Core Theory	1.87	2.82	2.75	2.68
Regulatory Focus Theory	Focused Theory: Scientific Support	0.16	2.33	3.00	2.33

Theory Name	Group	Knowledge	Application	Scientific Support	Importance
Rhetorical Sensitivity Model	Notable Theory	0.70	2.40	2.00	2.20
Rhetorical Theory	Core Theory	2.18	3.05	2.75	2.92
Semantic Network	Focused Theory: Scientific Support	0.93	2.32	2.72	2.23
Sense Making	Core Theory	1.99	3.21	2.83	3.12
Social Constructionism	Core Theory	2.50	2.93	2.67	2.81
Social Influence Theory	Focused Theory: Importance	0.92	2.45	2.56	2.53
Social Information Processing	Major Theory: Application, Scientific Support, & Importance	0.93	3.00	2.82	2.80
Social Judgment Theory	Notable Theory	1.00	2.33	2.29	2.36
Social Penetration Theory	Focused Theory: Scientific Support	1.02	2.32	2.67	2.15
Social Presence Theory	Notable Theory	0.91	2.45	2.21	2.35
Social Context of Communication	Focused Theory: Application	0.94	2.85	2.56	2.50
Source Credibility	Core Theory	1.25	2.86	2.65	2.68
Speech Act Theory	Major Theory: Knowledge, & Scientific Support	2.23	2.49	2.63	2.42
Speech Codes Theory	Focused Theory: Scientific Support	0.94	2.37	2.62	2.00
Spiral of Silence	Notable Theory	0.64	2.12	2.42	2.14
Strategic Messaging	Major Theory: Application & Importance	0.91	3.25	2.25	2.94
Stucturation Theory	Core Theory	1.80	2.78	2.70	2.78
Symbolic Convergence	Notable Theory	1.04	2.15	2.05	1.90
Symbolic Interactionism	Focused Theory: Knowledge	1.51	2.43	2.52	2.41
Theory of Communication Networks	Core Theory	1.66	3.03	3.03	2.97

Theory Name	Group	Knowledge	Application	Scientific Support	Importance
Theory of Reasoned Action	Notable Theory	0.98	2.28	2.44	2.22
Uncertainty Reduction Initial Interaction Theory	Focused Theory: Knowledge	1.22	2.26	2.27	2.30
Uses and Gratification Approach	Focused Theory: Scientific Support	1.00	1.95	2.65	1.71