I love listening to good communicators. Call it a “professional interest” or a “hobby” but I love listening to communicators. I am sure at the root of this interest is that I am passionate about growth and transformation and I believe good communication facilitates it. So for a variety of reasons, I love listening to good communicators. And I even listen to below average (i.e. bad) communicators – on purpose. I listen because I want to know – what makes them below average? What isn't working? What are they doing wrong? 

You know something that is ironic, even tragic, but not at all unexpected? If you ask ANY communicator to evaluate themselves, they will almost always (97.3486% of the time) describe themselves as “above average.” I remember a study from years back when preachers and their congregations were surveyed on how good the preaching was. The preachers overwhelmingly described themselves as above average (quite a few of them saying they were high above average) and their congregations generally described them as average or below. Hmmm . . . that's a major disconnect.

It is a self-awareness issue. It is also a self-esteem issue. If your line of work involves lots of communication, of course you want to think you are good at it. Whether you are or not, is of course, an entirely different matter. But chances are that you and I both think we are better than average, when we most likely aren’t.

Communication expert, Tim Koegel, says of communicators,

\[ \begin{align*} 
80\% & \text{are BELOW AVERAGE,} \\
10\% & \text{are AVERAGE,} \\
5\% & \text{are ABOVE AVERAGE, and} \\
5\% & \text{are EXCEPTIONAL.} 
\end{align*} \]

Eighty percent BELOW AVERAGE! Now, maybe he is saying this because he wants to sell lots of copies of his book, and to do that he needs to persuade communicators that they need it. Maybe! But maybe not! Apparently there are a lot of congregations who agree with Koegel’s assessment.

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1 To do this, just turn on the TV to the average religious channel and you'll have plenty of examples.

2 Okay, confession, I made up the stat in this paragraph, but it is reasonably ballpark to a 1/10 of a point.
Every year when December rolls around, I set a few learning goals for the upcoming year. In December 2007 I decided one of my learning goals would be in an area where I felt very under-prepared. That was in the area of internet technology. So I've spent the last year trying to become more up to speed in this area. I am a baby boomer. This is not my native culture or language. I was born too early. So, for me to survive and thrive in this new world, I have to be constantly learning this stuff. I have a long way to go, so 2009 will have more of the same focus in this. This was growth in an area of weakness that if left unattended could become a liability for me.

Another area of learning and growth for 2008 was in communication. Now, I think I am a pretty good communicator, (perhaps this is an illustration of lack of self-awareness) but even if I am, it is an area that I want to constantly pay attention to and grow to my fullest capacity. If it is a strength, I want to make it stronger. I believe effective communication is vital for fruitful leadership. I believe that if people are going to give some of their valuable time to listen to me, then I need to honor them by doing the very best I can to create a maximum communication/learning experience for them.

I don't assume that I am doing this. Nor do I assume that I am staying current and relevant with the emerging culture and its people. So, in this area, from time to time I go back to the "books." Almost every year I read one or two books on communication, but in December 2007, I decided that 2008 would have a major focus on this area. I've worked through about eight or so books (of a wide variety) on communication this year. One of the very last books that I will get through this year, was an easy one to read, but full of “throw down the gauntlet challenges” to become a better communicator.

*Koegel’s book is not focused on helping you develop the content part of your communication. His focus is improving your presentation skills that deliver the content which you think is important. As I mentioned earlier, Koegel believes 80% of “us communicators” are below average. He wants to change that. He realizes, however, that there are a few barriers that stand in the way:*

1. We are not very self-aware of our current starting point.
2. We are not naturally or easily open to feedback and correction about our starting point.

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*3 Among them were: The Story Factor by Annette Simmons; Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins by Annette Simmons; Made to Stick by Chip and Dan Heath; The Word Militant by Walter Brueggemann; and Culture Shift by David Henderson.*
We are lacking in the practice skills that would help us move on from that starting point.

His book is written with these three issues in mind. So Koegel will help you discover your starting point, i.e. what you are not doing very well, your weaknesses and deficiencies and mistakes. He is going to give you feedback. Yes it will be general feedback. From having studied hundreds/thousands of communicators, he has found the patterns of "below average communication" and he will address them. And Koegel will give you lots of strategies and practice tips for improving in the many different areas of presentation. I came up with at least a dozen items on which I need improvement.

I picked up this book, because like most of you who read this, I put FAR TOO MUCH emphasis on the CONTENT of communication and WAY TOO LITTLE focus on the METHODS of presentation. It is an occupational hazard, especially if you are in the ministry of teaching and preaching in the realm of church and mission. We love words. We love ideas. We naturally think, the more words and ideas the better. So we spend most of our time studying and interpreting and then writing out ideas/content.

You've heard it before, but let's say it one more time:

Only 7% of the total communication package/experience is determined by content/words! 7%

Yet we put 90% of our time in coming up with CONTENT!

38% of the communication experience is our VOICE.

55% of the communication package are the NON-VERBALS.

And we spend about 10% of our time paying attention to these factors! No wonder most of us are below average. And we will only improve from a starting point of being below average as we put a lot of attention and work in to developing the other 93% of communication. Exceptional presentations depend on the 93%. It's just the way it is. Get use to it. Accept it. And start doing something about it.

You need feedback about the 93%. Unfortunately, “Advice is seldom welcome. Those who need it most, like it least” (Samuel Johnson). “The trouble with most of us is that we would rather be ruined by praise then saved by criticism” (Norman Vincent Peale). Ouch! My toes have just been trampled on. I am part of that crowd. Koegel's a ‘toe stepping on” book that is going to cause a little pain.
In this book, Koegel will help you pay attention to the organization and structure of your presentation. This is a content issue. It is interesting because sometimes we have good content but it is poorly structured or incompletely organized and therefore, even our content falls short of the 7% impact it could have. Koegel will help you think about purpose, your outcomes, movement, and how you gain and keep people’s (very short) attention spans (15-30 second attention spans – bummer).

Koegel wants you to become a passionate communicator. The number one thing people are looking for in communicators is passion. We think they want our brilliant ideas. What they want is passion. You can keep on thinking that you know best and you know what they really need. You can think they need more of your ideas when they want more of your passion. Good luck. You’ll keep on being considered a “below average” presenter. What about this. Get passionate about your brilliant ideas. If they are that great, you should be on fire about them and communicate with enthusiasm. (Note – this does not mean shouting or getting louder.)

Here is what we just don’t realize. Passion is communicated, not mainly through clever or accurate wording of our ideas. Passion is communicated through our body language, our facial expressions, our gestures and our voice. Passion is almost ENTIRELY a function of delivery and not content. And, it must be the right kind of delivery. Believable, authentic, natural, personal . . . Even as I write this, several of my friends who are profoundly passionate communicators come to my mind.

Koegel’s book had some eye-opening descriptions of posture and gestures. If you do not watch yourself on video, then you have no idea at all (i.e. you are clueless) about your posture and gestures. You will not be self-aware of either. You have to see you in action. Koegel describes a number of distracting, even wrong postures and gestures. What was really painful for me was to realize that I use several gestures that are among the worst ones to use. And, one of the best postures to use is one that I find completely unnatural. Yet as soon as I read about it, I started watching the really good professionals, and sure enough – that was the posture they used! I don’t know whether to describe this as fascinating or depressing?

Moving on, your voice involves volume, inflection and tone, pacing and timing, rate and “verbal graffiti.” Again, you probably have no idea what you sound like unless you listen to yourself. The problem is that most of us really do not like the way we sound, so we don’t listen to ourselves. Take a minute and picture the ostrich with its head in the ground. That is you and me on this matter. We have to just “get over it” and listen to ourselves. Your voice is one of your most important tools in the communication experience (38%). So we have to start

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4 I also recently did something I have not done in a long time. I watched myself preaching. I watched two of the messages I did this summer! Painful is the word that comes to mind. Illuminating is the next word.
developing this tool and our skills in using it. Most of us will never be the Master of Voice as is Garrison Keillor, but we can all improve with this tool and skill.

And now, I'll take a minute to talk about verbal graffiti. Umm, you know, it's like, you know, just, really, unh, like stuff like this. You know. For Christians, not only do we have "normal graffiti" to deal with, but we also have our Christian graffiti. I recently listened to two different Christian leaders praying. For the one, almost half of his prayer was, "Lord Jesus Christ." That phrase was in every single sentence and often, several times in the sentence.

"Lord Jesus Christ, we just want to praise you Lord Jesus Christ for all the good things, Lord Jesus Christ you do for us, Lord Jesus Christ." And Lord Jesus Christ, we just want to ask you, Lord Jesus Christ, just to be with us, Lord Jesus Christ . . . (and on it went for agonizing minutes ). I wanted to scream – He knows you are talking to Him.

This is not an exaggeration. The "pray'er" was entirely unaware of it. I imagine he thought he was having a heartfelt, deeply meaningful prayer. Talk about vain repetition (Matthew 6:7)! And when did the word "just" ever make its way into our prayer the way it does? It is "just" verbal graffiti.

The other pray'er used "um" or "unh" constantly. “Lord, we unh want to unh ask you to unh . . .” (How about asking Jesus to help you stop saying um and unh!)

Prayer as communication is obviously a special form of communication for the Christian communicator. I think it is some of the most important communication we can do and like all our communication – it should be quality. We fall into bad habits that greatly hinder what we want to communicate. In both cases, I was going to say something to both the pray'ers, but I decided it would be too embarrassing for them to hear what I had to say. As I think about it, they were already embarrassing themselves, they just didn’t have the self-awareness to know it. I now think I did a disservice by not giving them feedback.

Koegel has a chapter on how to connect with your audience. What are their interests? That is crucial. Too many of us think what we are interested in is what they should be interested in. Wrong! I just redid a teaching because as I looked it over, I realized that while I was interested in it, most of my hearers would not be interested in it – as I was presenting it. I had to find a way to make this message "scratch where they itch, or should be itching." We need to use stories, illustrations, visuals, humor, dialogue, smiles, movement (of the right kind) rhetorical questions, eye contact, and much more.

Exceptional communicators learn how to read the audience and make adjustments. Koegel gives guidance on this. Exceptional communicators need to pull their audience into the experience. I like to say we have made the mistake of creating teaching events when we should have been creating learning
experiences. We have put the focus on information transfer instead of life transformation. Koegel doesn’t go into this issue very far, but he hits a few ideas on it.

Finally, Koegel wants you to be a natural communicator. A natural communicator is one who appears comfortable, at ease, relaxed, conversational, having fun, composed, confident, and generally being themselves. He’ll give you some good tips on dealing with nervousness.

In summary, I’d say this is a very practical book that wants to help you with the 93% of the communication experience that we neglect.

The final word (in fact, it was the constant word) was practice. You MUST PRACTICE if you want to improve. Those who practice rightly, improve. Those who do not practice, do not improve.

So pick up Koegel. Use him as a communication coach. Start practicing. Get feedback. Make adjustments. Move from below average to average and then to above average . . . and maybe some of us will even be able to join that group of exceptional communicators. It all depends – ON PRACTICE.