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Abbott & Costello's Proof That Media Selection Matters

We can't think of a better case in point than the dialog that follows. If you remember Abbot & Costello's classic "Who's on First?" routine, please read the following *verbatim* transcription; you'll be amazed at how poorly it works in print.

Note: If you aren't familiar with the routine, you can download a slightly different version from www.anchoragebus.com/classic.htm

Abbott: Alright, now. Whaddya want?

Costello: Now look. I'm the head of the sports department. I gotta know the baseball players' names. Do you know the guys' names?

Abbott: Oh, sure.

Costello: So you go ahead and tell me some of their names.

Abbott: Well, I'll introduce you to the boys. You know sometimes nowadays they give ballplayers peculiar names.

Costello: You mean funny names.

Abbott: Nicknames, pet names, like Dizzy Dean –

Costello: His brother Daffy –

Abbott: Daffy Dean –

Costello: And their cousin!

Abbott: Who's that?

Costello: Goofy!

Abbott: Goofy, huh? Now let's see. We have on the bags – we have Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know's on third.

Costello: That's what I want to find out.

Abbott: I say Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know's on third.

Costello: You know the fellows' names?

Abbott: Certainly!

Costello: Well, then, who's on first?

Abbott: Yes!

Costello: I mean the fellow's name!

Abbott: Who!

Costello: The guy on first!

Abbott: Who!

"Who's on First?": Abbott & Costello's Proof That Media Selection Matters

Costello: The first baseman!

Abbott: Who!

Costello: The guy playing first!

Abbott: Who is on first!

Costello: Now whaddya askin' me for?

Abbott: I'm telling you. Who is on first.

Costello: Well, I'm asking YOU who's on first!

Abbott: That's the man's name.

Costello: That's who's name?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: Well, go ahead and tell me.

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The guy on first.

Abbott: Who!

Costello: The first baseman.

Abbott: Who is on first!

Costello: Have you got a contract with the first baseman?

Abbott: Absolutely.

Costello: Who signs the contract?

Abbott: Well, naturally.

Costello: When you pay the first baseman every month, who gets the money?

Abbott: Every dollar. Why not? The man's entitled to it.

Costello: Who is?

Abbott: Yes. Sometimes his wife comes down and collects it.

Costello: Who's wife?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: All I'm tryin' to find out is what's the guy's name on first base.

Abbott: Oh, no: wait a minute. Don't switch 'em around. What is on second base.

Costello: I'm not askin' you who's on second.

Abbott: Who is on first.

Costello: I don't know.

Abbott: He's on third. Now we're not talkin' about him.

Costello: Now how did I get on third base?

Abbott: You mentioned his name!

Costello: If I mentioned the third baseman's name, who did I say is playing third?

Abbott: No. Who's playing first.

Costello: Never mind first. I wanna know what's they guy's name on third.

Abbott: No: What's on second.

Costello: I'm not askin' you who's on second.

Abbott: Who's on First.

Costello: I Don't Know.

Abbott: He's on third.

Costello: Aah! Would you please stay on third and don't go off it?

Abbott: What was it you wanted?

Costello: Now who's playin' third base?

Abbott: Now why do you insist on putting Who on third base?

Costello: Why? Who am I putting over there?

Abbott: Yes. But we don't want him there.

Costello: What's the guy's name on third base?

Abbott: What belongs on second.

Costello: I'm not askin' you who's on second.

Abbott: Who's on first.

Costello: I don't know.

Abbott & Costello: *THIRD BASE!*

Costello: You got an outfield?

Abbott: Oh, yes!

Costello: The left fielder's name?

Abbott: Why.

Costello: I don't know. I just thought I'd ask you.

Abbott: Well, I just thought I'd tell you.

Costello: Alright, then. Tell me who's playin' left field.

Abbott: Who is playing fir—

Costello: *STAY OUTTA THE INFIELD!* I wanna know what's the left fielder's name.

Abbott: What's on second.

Costello: I'm not askin you who's on second.

Abbott: Who's on first.

Costello: I don't know.

Abbott & Costello: *THIRD BASE!*

Costello: The left fielder's name?

Abbott: Why.

Costello: Because!

Abbott: Oh. He's center field.

Costello: Look. You gotta pitcher on this team?

Abbott: Now wouldn't this be a fine team without a pitcher?

Costello: The pitcher's name?

Abbott: Tomorrow.

Costello: You don't wanna tell me today?

Abbott: I'm tellin' you now.

Costello: Then go ahead.

Abbott: Tomorrow.

Costello: What time?

Abbott: What time what?

Costello: What time tomorrow are you going to tell me who's pitching.

Abbott: Now listen. Who is not pitching. Who is on fir—

Costello: I'll break you arm if you say Who's on first. I wanna know what's the pitcher's name.

Abbott: What's on second.

Costello: I don't know.

Abbot & Costello: *THIRD BASE!*

Costello: You gotta catcher?

Abbott: Oh, absolutely.

Costello: The catcher's name.

Abbott: Today.

Costello: Today. And Tomorrow's pitching.

Abbott: Now you've got it.

Costello: All we've got is a couple of days on this team.

Abbott: Well, I can't help that.

Costello: Well, I'm a catcher, too.

Abbott: I know that.

Costello: Now suppose that I'm catching. Tomorrow's pitching on my team and their heavy hitter gets up.

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: Tomorrow throws the ball. Their batter bunts the ball. When he bunts the ball, me being a good catcher, I wanna throw the guy out at first base. So I pick up the ball and throw it to who?

Abbott: Now that's the first thing you've said right.

Costello: I don't even know what I'm talking about!

Abbott: Well, that's all you have to do.

Costello: Is to throw the ball to first base.

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: Now who's got it?

Abbott: Naturally!

Costello: If I throw the ball to first base, somebody's gotta catch it. Now who caught it?

Abbott: Naturally!

Costello: Who caught it?

Abbott: Naturally!

Costello: Who?

Abbott: Naturally!

Costello: Naturally?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: So I pick up the ball and throw it to Naturally?

Abbott: *NO, NO, NO!* You throw the ball to first base and Who gets it.

Costello: Naturally.

Abbott: That's right. There we go.

Costello: So I pick up the ball and throw it to Naturally.

Abbott: You don't!

Costello: I throw it to who?

Abbott: Naturally.

Costello: *THAT'S WHAT I'M SAYING!*

Abbott: You're not saying it that way.

Costello: I said I throw the ball to Naturally.

Abbott: You don't. You throw the ball to Who.

Costello: Naturally!

Abbott: Well, say that!

Costello: *THAT'S WHAT I'M SAYING!* I throw the ball to who?

Abbott: Naturally.

Costello: Ask me.

Abbott: You throw the ball to Who?

Costello: Naturally.

Abbott: That's it.

Costello: *SAME AS YOU!!* I throw the ball to first and who gets it?

Abbott: Naturally!

Costello: Who has it?

Abbott: Naturally!

"Who's on First?": Abbott & Costello's Proof That Media Selection Matters

Costello: *HE BETTER HAVE IT!* I throw the ball to first base. Whoever it is grabs the ball, so the guy runs to second. Who picks up the ball and throws it to What. What throws it to I Don't Know, I Don't Know throws it back to Tomorrow – triple play.

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: Another guy gets up. It's a long fly ball to Because. Why? I don't know. He's on third and I don't give a darn!

Abbott: What was that?

Costello: I said I don't give a darn!

Abbott: Oh, that's our shortstop.

It doesn't quite jell in print, does it. Trust us: it does on film. (Or judge for yourself; we cited a URL on page 1.)

There's also a hidden concept here: control.

- ✍ We think of print as linear, where the author has control – and, of course, it is. But even linear presentations can be interrupted (fast forward, switching channels or stations, etc.), and most readers would put this printed transcription of this down because it doesn't work.
- ✍ Control is often necessary – more control than print allows. For "Who's on First?" to be effective, the audience has to get sufficiently involved to get lost in the absurdity. You almost never leave a theatre in mid-performance; and most won't reach for the TV remote before they're hooked on this zany skit.
- ? So it's often a more complicated question than linear vs nonlinear. Abbot & Costello's routine is obviously linear, but it also needs both control *and* multimedia.

P.S. -- Want another example of the importance of media selection? In 1960, all polls agreed that TV viewers thought Kennedy had won the debates with Nixon but that radio audiences had preferred Nixon. Most Americans had TVs in 1960; most didn't in 1956. It seems to us that the advantage of one medium over another is not only often clear-cut, but occasionally extremely important.

So: recognize both the importance and complexity of media selection.