The AS400: Uh-oh, "Words Matter"

Whenever I read an article about the AS400 and the author slips in the phrase "**words matter**" I picture them sitting at their desk imagining that they've just written something so profound that it will cause a thunderous echo in the minds of his or her readers. After all, in the beginning was the 'Word' and the word was AS400. But I digress.

Although the phrase is a cliché and not profound in any sense, the term is still 100% accurate and half of the truth. The other half is that "the audience matters" (cue thunder). And this part of the truth is one that many writers and speakers refuse to grasp. I'm giving them the benefit of doubt by using the word 'refuse' instead of the phrase 'too ignorant' because most of them are very intelligent people and deserve respect for what they've accomplished in their niche of the world.

When I say that the audience matters I should probably point out some examples of different audiences so people will be able to better understand what I mean by it.

The audience of people working in a small IT department at a small company is not the same as the audience working in a large IT department at a large company, nor is it the same as:

1. An audience of users at a small company
2. An audience of users at a large company
3. An audience of users at an old company with low turnover
4. An audience of users at a startup company
5. An audience of one CIO who's worked their way up through the IT department
6. An audience of one CIO who was hired fresh out of college
7. Or an audience of one company President who just wants to make cars, hats, or houses – not run an internal IT company
8. A mixed audience of any of the above

If you don't know the characteristics of your audience you're going to end up giving small variations of the same speech every time, accidentally reaching the one or two audiences it's compatible with.

I could go into what separates each of the audiences listed above and what the best way the idea that 'words matter' could be used to reach them but that's really up to the author or speaker to figure out. They're the one who wants people to understand them after all (instead of just waiting them out for the required half hour or hour).

** Note: If you're addressing a mixed audience it's a good idea to use the 1 for 4 rule, one humorous anecdote for every three important pieces of information. It keeps the audience engaged. Also, with mixed audiences technical details should be provided in handouts, after the meeting so they don't start reading them while you're talking, so the topic can be covered with much less jargon.