

Creating Compelling Messages: Helping Experts Find Their Voices

By Joanne Y. Cleaver

“Just tell me what to say and I’ll say it,” said the association CEO. I could imagine her communication staff huddled around the speakerphone in her office, trading worried glances.

She was scheduled for a major media interview the next day. The news hook: findings of a major research report that the association had just released. The report results framed the association’s advocacy platform for its members, who are women in the telecommunications industry. The CEO needed the report’s key points to grab the attention of industry leaders.

And somehow, among the 8,000 words and dozens of statistics in the report, we had to find them.

It wasn’t hard to identify the most compelling statistics and recommendations. But if the CEO just rattled off numbers that the reporter had already read in the report, the interview would be a flop. How could I help the CEO make the message her own?

When coaching an executive or expert for media interviews, it is tempting simply to write out bulleted talking points, focus on the facts, work up a short anecdote, and practice, practice, practice. However, this technique does not work—for two reasons. First, a good journalist will use prepared questions as a springboard for a deeper discussion. You cannot memorize answers for questions you don’t know are coming; focusing only on talking points leaves your spokesperson floundering when the interview goes off script, as it inevitably will.

Second, practicing is not the same as internalizing. Practice may make perfect, but perfect does not make for a compelling interview and authentic messaging. As a strategic communication coach, your goal is to help the spokesperson own the message, in his or her own voice. When she has reframed the message with her natural vocabulary in her natural style, she understands it on her own terms. She owns it. And since it is hers, she will be able to explain and expand on the core message with confidence as the interview unfolds.

This three-step process will help you create compelling content, by translating your messages to the spokesperson’s preferred style of communicating.

Hear—and Listen Actively

Active listening is underrated. Do you hear, see and feel what your spokesperson says? Or do you merely wait for your turn to keep talking?

Active listening means taking in the totality of her communication style, such as the words she uses, how she uses them, her tone, her pacing, and when and how she best conveys her main points.

Make a habit of actively listening every time you hear your spokesperson utter a word—in meetings, one-on-one, how she speaks on the phone, her casual banter with subordinates and peers. As you listen, use the list in the sidebar to identify the characteristics of your spokesperson’s communication style. Note when she is most at ease and when she

is most clear and compelling.

Here's an example: A technology company executive loves to drive conversations by asking "why?" Just like a preschooler, he habitually answers questions by asking more of them. It was pointless to try to break him of this habit. Yet, his style of challenging listeners could easily derail a media interview. What worked for him were talking points that pivoted on the question "why?" I set up short statements and statistics, inserted "why?" and added a short answer. For instance: "Social media is emerging as the primary consumer marketplace. Why is that? Because sites like Facebook are making it easy to buy what your friends recommend with just one click." This mirrored his speak-

ing habits. It was easy for him to absorb the talking points because they were already consistent with his style.

Reflect—and Take Notes

Reporters do not take statements at face value. They want to know the logic and evidence behind the assertions that your spokesperson will make. Once you have compiled your talking points, take 30 to 60 minutes with your spokesperson to unpack them. As you review the facts and stories behind the talking points, ask your spokesperson to retell those decisions and facts in his or her own words. As she does, take notes so that you can rewrite the talking points using the vocabulary, cadence and style

Characteristics of Communication Styles

Listen between the lines for cadence, vocabulary and communication cues. They will help you reformulate the message in terms that are natural to your spokesperson.

Cadence: *What is the spokesperson's natural rhythm of speech?*

- ✓ Slow/deliberate/careful/precise
- ✓ Motormouth/self-interrupting
- ✓ Short/concise/clipped
- ✓ Folksy/languid

Anecdotes: *How does the spokesperson use stories?*

- ✓ Openers or icebreakers
- ✓ Tied to current events
- ✓ To illustrate key points
- ✓ To underscore the emotional impact or connection with a customer, employee or stakeholder
- ✓ As a closer or summary

Verbs: *What kind of verbs does she use?*

- ✓ Academic/cerebral

- ✓ Power/sports/weather/physical forces
- ✓ Playful/poetic/punny
- ✓ Domestic/homey/family

How does she emphasize a point?

- ✓ Repetition
- ✓ Compelling statistic
- ✓ Slogan/"bumper sticker"
- ✓ By saying, "this is my main point"
- ✓ Flagging with a pet phrase such as, "we must remember," or, "this is the thing..."
- ✓ Straw man: setting up a contrast by making a statement only to contradict or correct it with the point she actually wants to make. An example: "Americans assume that housing is an investment. In fact, housing values have dropped by a third in the past five years, which is why the real estate industry is rethinking its business model."

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preferred by your spokesperson.

If your spokesperson has a hard time getting started (something common with financial and tech experts), ask her to explain each talking point to you as though you were her grandmother, a fellow guest at a dinner party, or even a third-grader. This exercise forces the spokesperson to simplify complex topics, in her own words. She will probably protest that this greeting-card version of the topic is oversimplified, but that's OK. It is far easier to insert complex, technical details into a simple explanation than vice versa.

Focusing only on talking points leaves your spokesperson floundering when the interview goes off script, as it inevitably will.

Don't hesitate to let the spokesperson know that the communication preferences you note are her preferred style. Many executives believe that they should sound like an academic. And many technical and subject matter experts think that a good quote is one that impresses their peers. So they will depend on your encouragement to confirm that simple, clear, en-

gaging messages that reflect their own views will resonate with media and audiences.

Internalize Style—and Reconstruct Points

Now that you have noted key characteristics of the spokesperson's communication style and reflected on the underpinnings of the talking points, it is time to reconstruct those talking points. The spokesperson should be able to summarize each talking point, in her own words. If she gets stuck, you are now equipped to prompt her using the vocabulary, cadence and style that reflect her communication style.

If you reconstruct the talking points on your own, at this point you've observed and collected the vocabulary, cadence and style. Using those tools, you can recast the points in a manner that's consistent with your spokesperson's voice.

It will only take about ten minutes to reassemble the key talking points from a 30- to 45-minute reflection session. Whether you are preparing the spokesperson for a media interview or writing a speech or presentation, the two of you now have a shared language—and shared ownership—of the message. **PRN**

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