

GIBBS & SOELL

# Insight

FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

June 2010

## Taming the Whirlwind: *Four Must-Have Communication Skills*

As the economic storm slowly passes we cautiously look around at the debris left behind, most notably a pummeled job market with unemployment still at highs we haven't seen in over 25 years. Add to that a bleak situation for new college graduates, who face a wicked search process filled with compromise and frustration.

And of course, professional communicators are not immune. Scores of seasoned marketing and public relations executives are still out of work and even corporations that cut too severely in these departments have been slow to take advantage of the deep talent pool of creative communications professionals.

### Blue Sky?

Although few are seeing a vibrant blue sky on the horizon, our clients are beginning to ask for recommendations or referrals to help fill spots for strong communications professionals.

We are reminded once again that the "new normal" we live in today means that job descriptions and skill sets are changing. Today's marketing and communications candidates, whether experienced veterans or recent graduates, had better be prepared to weather future storms with a new set of skills:

**Be Bilingual.** Sure, being fluent in Spanish or French won't hurt, but in this case we mean speaking the language of the C-suite.

As CEOs turn more and more to corporate communications to help manage brands in

transforming business performance, you must demonstrate that you understand the company's business model, how the business is doing financially and what gaps or opportunities exist in the marketplace.

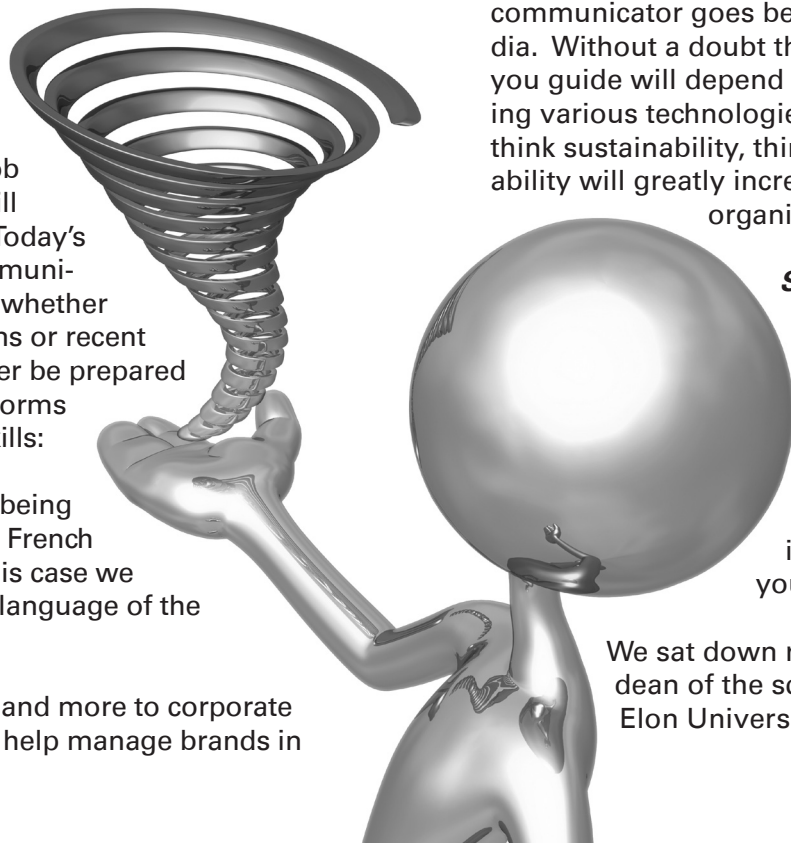
Then, once your credibility is established, be prepared to demonstrate that you understand the product or service value proposition and how you can help bring it to life in a meaningful and transparent way.

**Hybrid Responsibilities.** With digital and social media now a core part of any reputable communications program, you simply can't hold on to old archetypes that suggest "it's someone else's job." Kill that way of thinking! Sell yourself as Leonard Bernstein, a conductor – be the lead dog on the sled team (you get the point) – someone with the knowledge and team-building skills to bring it all together.

But also remember, being an experienced, hybrid-communicator goes beyond digital and social media. Without a doubt the communications programs you guide will depend on your dexterity at integrating various technologies and practices (think CSR, think sustainability, think research). Having this ability will greatly increase your influence within the organization.

**Strong Story Telling Skills (OK, Writing!).** Some things will never change. If you can't express yourself in writing, you will never make it as a communications pro. And today, one of the most valuable things you can do is expanding and sharpening your writing skills.

We sat down recently with Paul Parsons, dean of the school of communications at Elon University in North Carolina, and



former reporter and editor for UPI and AP. Parsons boils it down to this: Clear writing is a reflection of a clear mind...and your ability to produce writing that is not muddled and is clearly understood, is a strong indicator of your own ideas and your ability to think on the job.

Today, in our newly integrated world, you have to demonstrate this proficiency across many more media platforms including print, digital, Web, video and multiple combinations of all of them. Oh, and if that's not enough, you had better also understand how today's news is created and how it is read and shared online.

**Trusted Advisor Status.** Required reading for any communications professional should be David Maister's *The Trusted Advisor*.

Widely regarded as a leading authority on business management, Maister's website describes what he hopes readers will learn: know how to provide advice in such a way that the advice is received as helpful counsel, rather than just as an "expert's" assertions.

While Maister focuses on the way outside consultants work with clients to gain their trust and confidence, the lessons are easily applied to internal stakeholder relations as well, especially for communications departments operating under a professional service management philosophy.

Many senior communications professionals believe they have already achieved partner status with internal and external clients, and that may be true.

But to achieve trusted advisor status you go beyond developing professional trust. You must develop personal trust (this requires a personal investment). You do

more than listen. You hear what they mean, not just what they say. You go beyond providing marketplace experience. You provide valuable insights and an independent perspective.

### Future is Here


While Parsons is quick to point out the emphasis on writing for today's PR and communications professionals, he also gave us some insight into how rising communications schools are breeding tomorrow's top talent.

"Focusing entirely on content is a one-way model," says Parsons. At Elon, communications students become well-versed in three key areas: concepts, writing and production. While theory is still important, students today are learning about ROI, about privacy and other critical concepts. They're learning about strategic communications and how PR, advertising and social media come together.

But there's also growing emphasis on entrepreneurship so that students, while in tune with strategy, remain alert to the tactical opportunities that arise.

Parsons also underscores production as a key advantage his program can provide young graduates entering the workforce. "The technical side of communications, including desktop and hypermedia publishing, gives our graduates skill sets that are deeply desired at the front end of a career." And to top it off, says Parsons, they're able to hone their skills at on-campus agencies, serving real clients with real brand and communications challenges.

With educators helping to bring a new generation of hybrid-communicators to market, the future of our profession looks bright indeed.

The pressing challenge for professionals already in the market is keeping your "mature skills" sharp (story telling, news sense, etc.) while building up a new set of skills that will keep you competitive in a dynamic and extremely competitive market. And remember, it can't be a zero-sum game – today you need them all! 

### G&S Contact Information

*Cos Mallozzi*  
CEO  
+1 212 697 2600  
cmallozzi@gibbs-soell.com

*Luke Lambert*  
President  
+1 212 697 2600  
llambert@gibbs-soell.com

*New York*  
Audra Hession +1 212 697 2600  
ahession@gibbs-soell.com

*Chicago*  
Doug Hampel +1 847 519 9150  
dhampel@gibbs-soell.com

*Raleigh*  
Kerry Henderson +1 919 870 5718  
khenderson@gibbs-soell.com

*Zurich*  
Kevin Horsley +41 (0) 44 205 5565  
khorsley@gibbs-soell.com

*Beijing and Shanghai*  
Amanda Zhao +8610 6530 7783  
amanda\_zhao@inhere.com.cn

*Tokyo*  
Rachel Barrow +81 3 5561 2915  
barrow@cosmopr.co.jp



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