



THINKING OUT LOUD

A PSA WHITEPAPER

Speechwriter to Executive Communication Manager, in 10 Strategic Steps

How speechwriters can become infinitely more valuable to the principals they serve and the organizations they work for.

By Lucinda Trew, veteran Fortune 500 executive communication professional and teacher of the PSA mentorship course, Advanced Executive Communication Management.

FOREWORD

At the inaugural World Conference of the Professional Speechwriters Association, there was an open debate about the very name of the association.

Shouldn't it be called the "Executive Communicators Association"?

Because the last pure speechwriter probably went out with the last typewriter.

Modern speechwriters handle so many other things. Just look at the speechwriter-wanted ads:

"The position plays a central role in drafting executive communications, including keynote speeches, executive briefing notes and media releases and also drafts the organization's annual report."

"Drafting, coordinating and implementing comprehensive key messages for CEO communication."

"Help leaders communicate with precision and eloquence to advance the institution's mission and goals."

That's more than a speechwriter: It's more work, more responsibility, and a higher degree of difficulty.

In the end, we kept "speechwriter" in our name because the consensus was that "executive communicator" is a far less evocative term. And if people inside the profession and outside of it are drawn to "speechwriter," they can be made to expand their definition of the speechwriter's role.

This white paper is one effort in that direction.

As you read what its author Lucinda Trew says and how she says it, you'll soon see that Trew expresses the typewriter soul of a speechwriter, but the strategic mind of a modern executive communicator.

Readers of her essay will learn how to become more than a speechwriter, without becoming less than a speechwriter.

David Murray, Executive Director
Professional Speechwriters Association

OVERVIEW

The speechwriters I know, self included, aren't too wound up with titles. We spend enough time burnishing the brass and making the titled principals we work for look good and sound great.

But let's pause for a moment and think about our designations, what they mean and how we might elevate our roles, if so inclined.

The title of "speechwriter" is self-explanatory. We write speeches—for CEOs, elected officials, non-profit chairs and all matter of folk who have something to say—and need help saying it. We do more than write, of course. We research and ruminate, interview and prod, help our principals sift through data and details to uncover 'aha' ideas—all in the name of writing great speeches.

"Executive communications" is not so well defined. It's murky, mysterious, a fish stew of aptitude that means different things to different people:

- For some organizations, the title is just a spiffed-up, stretched-out synonym for speechwriter.
- For others, it's a way to encompass more than mere speeches. (As if speeches were ever meager or in need of trussing up!) The company may need someone who can write speeches ... *and* annual reports ... *and* analyst presentations ... *and* marketing collateral ... *and* web content.
- And then there's the cadre of corporate types who view executive communications as a strategic, esteemed and integral function. They want and need fine writing—and they want someone who can turn their executives' commitment of speaking time into a shiny, all-gears-clicking, high-yielding asset.

The great news for exec comms professionals—either appointed or aspiring—is that the ambiguity gives us great leeway to define our own roles. Think about it: Executives deal with hard lines, precision and exactitude. Their comfort zone is black and white. If you want to see their heads spin, introduce a Crayola palette of choices and creative options! So, for some, having a speechwriter feels odd, uncomfortable. *They just don't know what to do with you!*

Help them out by suggesting—better yet, *showing*—how you can help and add value. And since the "executive comms" function remains a bit fuzzy, let's look at what sets us apart:

- 1. Executive comms professionals think strategically.** They think creatively, of course. But they also understand an organization's goals and direction. They're familiar with the competitive landscape in which the organization operates. They understand the historic cycles that have shaped the industry they're working and writing within. They have a

handle on current challenges, opportunities and outlook. They know how a business makes money. The sweet spots and sore points. They may not know how to model project hurdle rates, structure an M&A deal or code the next great app, but they are inquisitive and attuned to the inner workings of the organization.

They're strategic in another sense as well. They know how the work they do advances their organization's goals. In an exec comms' capable hands, a speech is more than a speech. It is a means to an end: a strategic tool that elevates an executive's profile, a company's competitive position, and the culture and reputation of an organization.

2. Executive comms professionals are audience advocates. Their allegiance rests with their organization, of course, but they also offer a unique "outside-in" perspective that can get overlooked in some large organizations. They ask the "what does that mean for me? / why should I care?" questions that the engineers and programmers may not consider. They simplify. They clarify. They sift through the jargon. And they conjure memorable, meaningful stories from the complexity. They do the front-end audience analysis that's essential to connecting a principal with his or her constituents.

3. Executive comms professionals build relationships. For many of us, the best speechwriting days are those that find us blissfully ensconced behind closed doors—our only companions a venti latte and keyboard.

Exec comms pros venture beyond their quiet, cozy comfort zones. They interact and engage. They build bridges and relationships—not only with their principal, but with colleagues across the enterprise. They connect with subject matter experts. They become trusted allies within the executive suite. They respect and value the contributions of engineers, accountants, executive assistants and field technicians.

They understand that great speeches aren't written in a vacuum—and that exec comms done right is a social enterprise, which can be awkward and challenging and time consuming. But, as speechwriters, we take our role to a higher level when we master working independently *and* collaboratively.

Executive communicators also build external relationships. They know the conference organizers, speaker forum leads and industry association peers to reach out to. They know the media outlets to pitch op-eds to. And they network with fellow speechwriters and are active within their professional circles—adding to and taking advantage of shared knowledge and lessons learned.

4. Executive comms professionals think big picture and long term.

They don't approach the latest industry keynote as a one-off, but as an essential piece of a larger whole. They write with an eye toward the horizon, and are intentional in their positioning and prose. Sure, they aim for work that gets applause and retweets today. But they also want to move audiences to think about the future ... advance an organization's sustainable success ... and deliver products that stand the test of time. Just as high-performing companies think beyond the current fiscal quarter, high-performing executive communicators think beyond the hot-off-the-printer address.

5. At the same time, executive comms professionals sweat the small stuff.

They're meticulous regarding the prelude-to-postscript details of a speech. They are rigorous and discerning in the vetting of speaking invitations.

They thoroughly brief executives throughout the process—and anticipate questions, concerns and what-ifs. They nail down the logistics—speaker order, introductions, dress code, podium set-up, mic options, etc.

They make sure transportation is planned and easy, and they carry an emergency bag of water, cough drops, gum, tissues, readers—and whatever else their speakers might need. They don't feel minion-ized by the "body man" aspect of this, understanding that adding value and ensuring a successful outcome is what you want—and what your speaker deserves.

And finally, good exec communicators ask for—*push for*—feedback from their principals, audiences and conference organizers.

6. Executive comms professionals extend shelf life.

They don't file speeches away. They leverage them to the hilt—via social media, traditional media, trade associations, employee comms vehicles, op-eds and interviews. They think in return on investment terms—and they squeeze every bit of return from the commitment of time, intellectual energy, blood, sweat and tears.

7. Executive comms professionals manage plans and priorities.

They do the research and drafting of speeches of course. And, they hammer out the plans behind the speeches—executive positioning strategies that support an organization's larger goals. They're specific about how they can help the company achieve those goals. They tie their contributions to quantifiable business results. They identify points of collaboration and support across the organization. If sustainability is a corporate priority, for example, they suggest ways to help elevate the messaging

via a CEO introduction to the annual sustainability report, or partnering with investor relations to drive awareness among the analyst community.

8. Executive comms professionals manage people. Speechwriting is often a solitary enterprise. But in larger organizations, exec comms professionals manage people. They may have a small staff ... mentor colleagues within the broader communications function ... or manage freelance writers, designers or consultants. That means they need to be able to provide clear, compelling direction; allocate time and resources; prioritize efforts; inspire excellence.

And here's a key point: In addition to the administrative juggling work they do, they must maintain their own writing credentials. It's tough as tacks to manage writers if you're not a writer. To begin with, you lack street cred with your staff. Your red pen loses a bit of its crimson authority. You can't give good direction or feedback. So, manage your team by being a writing member of the team.

9. Executive comms professionals manage time. Their own time, certainly—meeting deadlines and adapting to real-time shifts. There are times when you'll need to deliver a final draft to the corporate jet at the hangar, literally catching your executive on the fly.

Exec comms experts also need to manage and master the time they spend with the principals. That's a tough one. Time is a precious commodity that is hoarded and hard to get—especially among executives, board members, public officials and non-profit chairs who measure time in 15-minute fractions. They simply don't have it to give. And even if they do have some spare change of time, they may not want to spend it with *you*. Nothing personal—but think about it: Nobody looks forward to giving a speech. They'd rather have a root canal or endure a telemarketer marathon. And you, as lovely and talented as you are—you are a nagging reminder of the dreaded task at hand!

The goal then is to take some of the dread away, take the sting out of speaking, and show that you can be a trusted ally and advisor.

Here is something many of us have learned the hard way: Do not go into an executive's office with the notion that you're going to "brainstorm," "pick her brain," or lean back and listen to him riff. Unless you're working for a very rare breed of executive, that is just lazy, unproductive and it certainly won't get you invited back!

Go in with a purpose ... a plan ... answers to the questions that will surely be asked ... even better, an outline—or some proof positive that

you're on top of this and have already committed time, thought and energy to the effort. Bottom line: Don't count on having limitless time with your principal; make the time you have count.

10. Executive comms professionals are pragmatic practitioners—not prima donnas. They don't fall in love with their words—and if they do, they don't wear their heart on their sleeve. They navigate the barracuda-filled review sea with finesse and fearlessness, committed to products that are eloquent, uplifting—and flawlessly scrubbed and 100% accurate.

They understand their job isn't about making *themselves* look good; they are accountable for making their principals look good—and doing good for their organizations and stakeholders.

Executive communications is a hybrid. Neither fish nor fowl, it is a crossbreed craft—speechwriter, strategist, collaborator and counselor.

In essence, executive communications is Speechwriting 2.0: the next generation of a revered and remarkable profession. The terms are used interchangeably—with nuanced and noteworthy differences, noted above.

Now here's a point worth mentioning: I believe you can be a speechwriter without being an exec comms specialist; but it would be a heck of a stretch to be an exec comms expert without being a speechwriter. You need Speechwriting 1.0—and all the basic and advanced competencies that earned you a manager title and a seat at that long, prestigious mahogany table. Whatever you do, wherever you sit—keep writing! You don't want to be like the teacher promoted to vice principal—too long removed from the classroom and dismally out of touch with the work you love.

Speechwriting is the heart of what we do. It is the swan's egg that hatches into something sublime ... the salty, silver flash in the sea ... the prerequisite to executive communications and all that comes next. So, know your craft. Practice your craft. Be good at what you do. And whatever your title, spread your finned wings and soar!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lucinda Trew is an award-winning speechwriter and communications strategist. Over the course of a 30-year corporate career she has helped Fortune 500 CEOs, directors and C-suite executives advance business and reputational goals through strong narrative and compelling content. Lucinda is now an exec comms consultant and a respected lecturer on leadership communications.