

A Buyer's Guide to Communications Training Consultants

By Ed Barks



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Introduction

It is safer to bet with the devil than stoop to “winging it” when communicating in public.

How do astute organizations prepare their leaders and other spokespeople for the give-and-take when facing the press, public, and lawmakers? They seek outside counsel in the form of a dedicated communications training consultant.

This buyer’s guide is designed to spell out your options. At the same time, it outlines some of the questions you should consider and some of the answers you need to hear as you launch your search. A handy list of “must ask” questions is included in the Appendix.

Who Needs a Communications Training Consultant?

The steady hand of a veteran communications training consultant helps to sharpen the communications edge of organizations large and small. Most sophisticated organizations draw on the expertise of a trainer on, at the very least, an occasional basis.

There are several possible reasons for contracting with a consultant:

- Your internal staff does not possess the knowledge, experience, or expertise necessary to teach senior executives.
- Your staff lacks the time needed to develop a training program.
- Your executives need straight talk that your staff fears to give.
- Your CEO needs an independent sounding board to help solve a vexing communications issue.
- Your current communications staff has proven incapable of producing long-term improvement in your organization’s messaging and spokesperson skill level.

While a reputable trainer would never guarantee victory in the court of public opinion, he can empower you with the message and communications skills that tilt the odds in your favor.

Savvy organizations insist that their spokespeople undergo training on a regular basis. For some this means an annual refresher. Groups with a lot of irons in the fire need more frequent tune-ups for larger groups of people.

What Situations Dictate the Need for a Consultant?

Your company or association benefits from the services of an expert communications training consultant when contending with situations such as these:

- Dealing with the media
- Delivering presentations

- Presenting legislative testimony to committees of Congress, the state legislature, or your local city council
- Appearing as a witness before a regulatory panel

Let us go a step deeper and list some of the events that could spark an onslaught of media interest:

- Unveiling of a new corporate initiative
- Hiring of a new CEO
- Crisis situation
- Product launch
- Firing of your chief financial officer

Your need to steel your executives, board members, sales force, or technical team to deliver presentations could arise when they prepare to:

- Pitch to a potential customer
- Deliver an address to your trade association or professional society designed to catapult you into a leadership capacity
- Translate technical jargon into lay language
- Undertake a road show
- Establish a campaign designed to raise the profile of your president

Your appearance as a witness before legislative and regulatory panels may stem from:

- A desire to support a bill that directly affects your organization
- Investigation into something your group did (or failed to do)
- Regulatory oversight hearings
- An attempt to block laws or rules unfavorable to your cause
- Congress' need for your specific expertise

Choosing the Right Fit

Some of the issues below will apply to you; others will not since every situation is unique. Moreover, your choice of an expert to guide you through a media thicket today may differ from your selection to guide you through Congressional testimony tomorrow.

Knowledge counts for a lot, but you also ought to seek out a proper fit. You must feel comfortable with your consultant. Not only will you be disclosing some sensitive organizational information, you will also be baring your soul—at least your communications soul—to him. Aim for someone whose company you find agreeable.

Also ensure he doesn't make unnecessary demands on you. Yes, you need to be involved in planning your workshop. But it is the trainer's job to orchestrate all the details. Bottom line: Find someone who is pleasant to work with and does not issue unrealistic requests.

Additionally, assess the trainer's compatibility with your organization. Some trainers prefer to avoid travel and work only with small, local groups. If you

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represent a Fortune 500 company or a major trade association that is national or global in scope, such an individual will find himself hopelessly in over his head. Similarly, a trainer who deals primarily with Fortune 500 clients may prove a poor match for a local non-profit group both in terms of your perspective and your budget.

The cold, hard truth is you may not find a training consultant who meets every one of your needs precisely, so prioritize the factors based on their importance to you and your current circumstances. Still, an expert who is strong in eight or nine out of ten categories you deem important should get the nod over another who has knowledge in only a few narrow areas.

One last comment about proper fit. I am a firm believer that fun needs to be an integral part of any workshop. That is not to say I conduct a stand up comedy routine for my clients. But the fact is children are not the only ones who learn better when a sense of enjoyment is part of the learning environment. Adult learners deserve some fun, too. Something to consider if the trainers you interview come across as cold fish.

Is Your Trainer Really a Trainer?

You need to ascertain a couple of key facts right from the top. Make these the very first questions you ask a prospective media or speech training consultant:

- Do you focus exclusively on communications training?
- What percentage of your business is dedicated to training?
- How much experience do you have as a trainer?

Why are these issues paramount? Communications training is a highly skilled niche. It demands a specialist dedicated to advancing his learning day after day, year after year.

Beware, for a pack of wannabe trainers stands ready to pounce. Large public affairs and public relations agencies have slashed senior staff in recent years. This factor puts you in potential jeopardy on two fronts.

First, many agencies—even the recognizable global names—are now populated by less experienced staffers. Those agencies that once maintained outstanding communications training departments have, in most cases, eliminated or

eviscerated them. The name of the firm itself means little if they intend to farm out your project to an unproven junior employee.

How do you address this risk? Ask for the name of the trainer who will lead your sessions. Any reputable agency will not hesitate to provide you with the specific name of your trainer when you sign your agreement.

You have the right to press for a specific name, experience level, and a copy of your trainer's biographical sketch. Read that bio carefully to ensure a heavy emphasis specific to his bona fides as a trainer, not simply as a veteran public affairs or media hand.

The second prospective pitfall for you: Staff cutbacks have put a lot of hungry PR people out on the street. Many of them felt forced to hang out their own shingle when the job market held no demand for their talents. What did they decide to specialize in? Basically, anything that put your money into their pockets. If you ask some of these individuals, they will tell you that they do indeed provide training services. Of course, they also will write a news release, develop your web site, and perhaps even change the oil in your car.

Don't get me wrong, such generalists often possess useful skills. But when it comes to the rigors demanded of a communications trainer, you would be cheating yourself and endangering your organization by settling for a jack-of-all-trades.

Think of it this way. You may have the highest level of comfort and trust in your family physician. But if the day should come when you need open heart surgery, my guess is you will not ask that folksy doctor to perform the operation. No, you would demand the top cardiac surgeon. Consider your communications trainer as your personal communications specialist.

Who Needs Another Expert?

Take particular heed of this piece of advice: Your training consultant does not need to be an expert in your field.

I don't care if your domain encompasses medicine, law, international trade, or any other discipline. You have plenty of experts on staff to deal with technical questions that may arise.

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Your trainer takes on the role of your sherpa with regard to how your message will play in public, not in the technical specs of your latest product. Yes, he should have an acquaintance with your issues. But remember you are not bringing on board another expert to help you design your product or set your policy. Rather, you are working with someone who can help you explain its benefits to your public.

To ensure your consultant keeps his learning up to date, don't hesitate to inquire how he advances his professional development. What is the last workshop he attended? What about the last book he read? What books, training guides, articles, and videos has he produced? What research has he conducted? The cream of the crop researches, publishes, and presents findings regularly.

Avoid the Assembly Line

You also want to ensure that your trainer will custom tailor a workshop specifically for you. A manufacturer about to announce plant closures faces challenges different from an association suffering a lag in membership or a pharmaceutical company marketing a new drug, for example.

One way to scope out your prospective trainer's philosophy on this matter is to listen. When you interview him, does he mention the PowerPoint slide deck he shows to each and every client? That is probably a sign of a cookie cutter approach. Does he tell you everyone will do television interviews during the training? Again, a bad sign if your plans include outreach only to the trade press.



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Any communications consultant worth hiring has a variety of flexible learning modules he can adjust to fit your particular needs. For example, I have developed dozens of possible components over the years. Some I use frequently; others rarely. But I keep them all in my bag of tricks.

Make it a point to inquire what modules your potential trainer maintains. You will need only a fraction of them in any given workshop, but knowing what he has gives you a glimpse into his capabilities and tells you he devotes plenty of thought to the art of training.

Creating a Magnetic Message

It is vital that your trainer of choice be skilled in message development. Some organizations have forged clear and concise messages; others have the bare bones; still others have paid no attention whatsoever to their messaging.

Regardless of where you stand on the message spectrum, a skilled trainer can help you fine tune your message and show you how to frame it for optimum impact.

Nearly every training consultant will say he is adept at message development. But how can you tell for certain? Tempting though it may be, it is not appropriate to ask what messages he has crafted for other organizations. Such information is highly confidential. Would you want him unveiling your message strategy to someone else? Of course not.

Rather, ask him about his approach to message development. If he tells you about sound methods he uses to logically construct messages, that is a good sign. If, on the other hand, the explanations sounds nebulous or he just rattles off a collection of unstructured facts related to your issue, look elsewhere. Your corporate messaging is too important to be entrusted to an amateur.

Another means of discovering his approach is to ask what he has written on the subject. He should be eager to share any articles, columns, or excerpts from training guides to demonstrate his proficiency.

While on the subject, I suggest you ask your consultant what he has written about media relations, public speaking, or witness preparation. Request some samples to give you a better feel for his philosophy. Thought leaders in any field should be published regularly; this includes communications training consultants.

The same principle pertains to training guides. I recommend you work with a trainer who includes as part of your package a book or comprehensive training guide that reinforces the high points of your workshop. Some offer formal publications while others provide only a few quick-copied sheets. You need to decide which format you prefer.

Let's Go to the Videotape

Your trainer should be accustomed to videotaping every practice interview that occurs during your workshop. And he should play back and critique each experiential exercise immediately upon its conclusion. Going to the videotape is, in my experience, by far the most powerful learning technique for most people. Seeing is believing.

Hang on to your recording when your workshop is over (unless you leave it with your consultant to study for a follow up session). Reviewing this video is a great lifelong learning tool provided you review it later. Don't let it gather dust on a shelf.

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A word about videotaping arrangements: Insist that your trainer bring in a professional videographer to do the shoot. Yes, this will cost you a bit more, but it is well worth it for two reasons.

First, it frees your trainer to focus on the flow of the training and not get bogged down in starting and stopping a camera, rearranging

furniture for different interview formats, and swapping out DVDs. Second, a professional videographer should have some field experience. He adds to the realism of your training by using techniques camera operators at TV stations use. This added dimension better prepares you for your real life encounters.

Pivoting on a Dime

Be sure your training consultant is flexible enough to incorporate last minute issues that might arise. It is true that much of the planning should be done ahead of time. But if an issue blows up the day before your workshop, a pro should be able and willing to adjust on the fly to help ease you through it.

Looking at the other side of that coin, avoid trainers who leave all preparation to a mad, last minute scramble. That is a sure recipe for a slipshod, disorganized session.

Part of your commitment to the training is to furnish background materials well in advance. If you fail to do so, expect a professional to kick and scream (albeit politely) until you pony up the goods.

You can expect one or more meetings (either in person or via telephone or video conference). In addition, expect to make yourself available for several quick phone conversations and e-mail exchanges. This is not to waste your valuable time, but to ensure your workshop is organized to create the most meaningful learning experience possible.

In the end, the onus is on the trainer to marshal the necessary materials. This also includes materials he digs up on his own. My clients are sometimes surprised to hear what I unearth when conducting my independent research. I often check resources they have not considered or hear chatter from other sources to which they do not have access.

Independent research on your trainer's part is mandatory. It is far better to deal with "hidden" issues in the security of your training environment than to be blindsided with a question from a reporter, lawmaker, or audience member in a public setting.

Your consultant needs to be fearless when it comes to raising issues with your senior executives. An intimidated trainer is an ineffective figurehead. He should be ready and willing to raise and deal with issues that could get internal staff reprimanded or fired.

Open the Lines of Communication

An open dialogue leading up to your training is vital. If you have any difficulty at all reaching your trainer prior to your workshop, that should raise a red flag. It means one or more things:

- a) He is not paying attention to your needs
- b) He is too disorganized to do an effective job for you
- c) He doesn't care

Any of the above answers are risky propositions. Do not hesitate to back out and find another trainer if communication becomes a problem. Better you forfeit your deposit than hazard a poor workshop that could cost your organization untold sums in both dollars and public image.

Communication after the fact is also imperative. Some spokespeople make the mistake of thinking they have been "media trained" after a single workshop. Wrong! Your consultant should provide some sort of follow up. For instance, I offer my book, *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*, or a comprehensive training guide. In addition, clients receive follow up telephone and e-mail consultation with each executive training. Look for some assurance that your trainer is not a "here today, gone tomorrow" type, assuming that is important to you.

Now, a word or two if your company has a large public relations agency on retainer. Unless your contract is structured

to your extreme disadvantage, you have the right to request an independent training consultant of your choosing. Reputable independents will work closely

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with you and your agency's account team to develop a workshop that suits your needs.

Getting to Know You

How can you perform due diligence on your prospective training consultant? First, visit his web site. You should, at a minimum, find the basics—training philosophy, biography, contact information, news releases, and the like.

If the site fails to emphasize training capabilities, strongly consider looking elsewhere. This is likely a sign of a generalist with little experience specific to the demanding specialty of communications training.

Seek out someone with a web site that offers resources designed to aid in your learning and to advance your insights into his training approach. Articles, white papers, columns, and an array of products designed to foster lifelong learning are signs of a trainer who places an emphasis on your education over the long haul.

If he has no web site, you are likely dealing with a freelancer and not a business person. I find the lack of a web presence in the 21st century a bit mystifying. A presence on the Internet facilitates communication whereas a void forces you to take an extra step when conducting your due diligence. Why hire someone who makes you do extra work?

How else can you check an individual consultant's credentials? Go online to your favorite search engine and plug in his or her name in quotation marks (e.g., "Jane Smith") along with the phrase "communications training," "media training," or "presentation skills training" (note that phrase should also be in quotes). Compare the results among the consultants you are considering. If you don't see the results you think you should, don't hesitate to expand your pool of candidates.

I once performed this test when an individual I had never heard of was brought on board for a presentation on media training to a professional society. I make it my job to keep up to date with the top training consultants and I thought it strange I had not come across this fellow before. Using the method described above, it turns out that the only hits generated by this alleged expert appeared in the announcement for the event. Not once previously had he ever associated his name with the craft of media training. I cannot help but wonder what that audience learned.

Assess your prospective consultant's presence on various social media sites, such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube. A word of advice: Don't expect to find tracks on every single site. People who spend countless hours on social networking sites probably have too much time on their hands and spend too little of it with their clients.

Take heed of his level of professionalism on these sites. Does he offer sound advice and thought-provoking insights? Or are there nauseatingly regular postings about what he ate for breakfast, the cute new trick his dog learned, or pointless updates from a football game? Remember, you are looking for a professional capable of helping you and your organization, not a new best friend forever.

Questions, Questions

During your search phase, you would also do well to pose some simple inquiries that, much to my amazement, many people fail to raise. If you are seeking media training, inquire about your consultant's prior newsroom experience. You need a former reporter who has worked in a newsroom (do not expect to find an active journalist serving as a media trainer; that represents a clear conflict of interest).


Why is this background important? One of the roles of a media training consultant is to act as translator. Executives need insight into how reporters work and how they think. That is where the consultant's media experience proves invaluable. It is simply impossible for a media trainer to put himself in the shoes of a reporter if he has never inhaled the rarified air of a newsroom on a daily basis.

Similarly, when your need is presentation skills training, ask about your potential consultant's speaking abilities. Does he speak in public often? Does his web site prominently mention the topics on which he speaks? A subpar or inexperienced speaker normally translates into a poor speaking teacher.

Here is another measuring stick for your training consultant. Inquire which professional societies he belongs to. Professional development workshops and good old fashioned networking provided by such groups represent time-tested methods for extending lifelong learning. Your trainer should always be working actively to broaden his knowledge.

Dollars and Sense

Expect your training consultant to quote you a professional fee on a project basis, though some still offer day or half-day rates. The proposal should reflect your



Look for some assurance that your trainer is not a "here today, gone tomorrow" type.

specific situation and requirements. Steer clear of obvious one-size-fits-all pitches that make sense only for the consultant, not for you.

For purposes of clarity, look for the following in your proposal:

- The project's objectives
- How you plan to measure success
- A clear outline of who is accountable for what
- A menu of options to approach your situation
- The consultant's credentials, in brief
- Terms and conditions, including the professional fee

If you are seeking media training, inquire about your consultant's prior newsroom experience.

Typically, you can anticipate paying a portion of the professional fee at the time you sign your agreement with the balance due either upon the day of your training workshop or, if yours is an extended project, at a series of future dates defined in your written agreement.

The more work you do internally in terms of developing sophisticated messaging and providing background information necessary for your training workshop, the less you are asking your consultant to do. It makes sense, therefore, that your project is likely to involve a lower professional fee.

What about expenses? Many consultants bill separately for such items as airfare, lodging, and meals. Some may try to charge you for basic business expenses like telephone and delivery services.

Others fold expenses into the professional fee. Some organizations favor this method as it offers them budget certainty, transferring the risk for unexpected outlays to the consultant. Opt for the method that you prefer. Quality consultants should be able to handle this either way. The bottom line: Make sure you are clear on who pays for what, and that it is spelled out in your agreement.

I can best address the subject of the level of professional fees by telling you of my experiences when I worked for an association. Although we developed a sophisticated and vigorous internal media training program for our leading members, we also turned to training consultants to reinforce our approach.

We hired some on the cheap (i.e., less than \$1000) and some with gold plating (more than \$5000). We normally got what we paid for. One low-cost trainer tried hard, but she proved unable to drive home the lessons our members needed. The upscale trainers typically earned their keep.

Benefits and Drawbacks of Using a Star

Reputation matters, so if your training consultant maintains a high public profile, has written a book, gets involved with organizations that provide him with important connections, and the like, you should expect to pay a higher professional fee.

Note that a higher public profile should not mean that a consultant shouts his client list from the rooftops. In fact, some consultants do not release client lists. The rationale is client-centric. Communications training is generally a highly confidential experience, given the sensitive issues it often encompasses. If you approve of a consultant mentioning your name to others, that is your decision. Just be sure you are clear on the circumstances under which this can be done.

A word of acknowledgement about budgets: They can be tight. If you are uncomfortable with the numbers proposed, ask how the scope of the project can be trimmed. Perhaps the number of trainees can be reduced or your internal staff can take on added duties. Remember that everything in your proposal is negotiable. It may prove merely a starting point for arriving at the best solution for your organization.

But it is better to save your pennies and wait rather than risk a low-cost, low-results effort. The difference could mean success or failure for your initiatives. It could even affect the very survival of your organization.

The point here is skimping on your training budget can get you into hot water when a poorly prepared spokesperson sticks his foot in his mouth during a presentation or an interview. The white hot lights of a network camera crew or the glare of public attention during a high profile speech is no place for on the job training.

You can also profit should your training consultant unearth other communications issues that need attention within your organization. Expect him to highlight such shortfalls and make recommendations. Yes, you will need to arrive at another agreement if those matters fall outside the agreed upon scope of work. But your consultant's greater familiarity with your issues should help to streamline the new project to a great degree.

Some spokespeople make the mistake of thinking they have been "media trained" after a single workshop. Wrong!

The Budget-friendly Double Dip

Speaking proficiency also comes into play in another very practical and budget-friendly way. Many corporations and associations offer training for their officers and executives in conjunction with corporate retreats or national meetings.

Such gatherings typically feature a multitude of breakout sessions, seminars, and workshops. If your trainer is an accomplished speaker, ask him to fill one of those other slots, too. You should expect to pay an added professional fee, but you will save on the travel expenses you would otherwise need to incur if you were to bring in a separate speaker.


One other point about professional fees: Your consultant should give you a break if you sign a contract for multiple trainings. Just be prepared to commit to specific dates and times when you sign your agreement.

Your Next Step

Congratulations on your decision to gain the advice of a skilled communications training consultant. It is a big step, so ask plenty of questions and listen closely to the answers you receive from your prospective trainer.

Applying the recommendations from this buyer's guide will help you identify the individual who best fits your current situation. The right training consultant will make life much easier for you in the days and weeks leading up to your workshop.

More importantly, he will provide the guidance your organization needs if you hope to achieve a higher communications capability in the weeks, months, and years ahead.



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Appendix

Are you in the market for an experienced communications training consultant who can help you sharpen your abilities to deliver presentations, deal with reporters, and testify before government officials? Here are 20 questions designed to help you select the individual who best suits your needs:

1. Do you focus exclusively on communications training?
2. How much experience do you have as a trainer?
3. What percentage of your business involves training specifically?
4. What is the name of the individual who will lead my training?
5. How much independent research do you typically conduct in advance of a training workshop?
6. What published training guide do you offer participants?
7. What books and articles have you written?
8. Share an example when you needed to accommodate some eleventh hour fine-tuning.
9. What is your web site address?
10. What type of clients do you work with?
11. What flexible training modules have you personally developed?
12. If you are seeking media training: Have you worked in a newsroom?
13. If you are looking for presentation skills training: How accomplished a speaker are you?
14. Tell me about your approach to message development.
15. If your training occurs in conjunction with a larger meeting: Can you serve as a speaker for a separate session to help me save on my travel budget?
16. What type of experiential exercises do you utilize?
17. Tell me about your commitment to lifelong learning for your students.
18. Do you offer a reduced rate if I sign a contract for multiple trainings?
19. Do you believe in integrating fun into your workshops?
20. To which professional societies do you belong?

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sharpen your spokespeople's communications skills

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About the Author

Ed Barks works with corporate and association executives who deal with reporters and members of Congress, and with public affairs experts who want a seat at the decision-making table.

Ed is the author of [*The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*](#) and has written the training guides *Face the Press with Confidence: The Media Interview Companion* and *Winning at the Witness Table: 60 Tips to Terrific Testimony*. He is also the former "Speaking Sense" columnist for the *Washington Business Journal*.



His media training and presentation skills clients say he "knows how to elicit peak performance." They call him "a master at connecting with his audience" and "an effective educator," and give his communications training workshops "two thumbs up!"

As President of Barks Communications since its founding in 1997, Ed has guided more than 3000 business leaders, association executives, government officials, non-profit leaders, physicians, athletes, entertainers, and public relations staff toward a sharper message and enhanced communications skills.

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