Verbal communication with PR audiences

This topic guide covers the range of verbal communication used by PR practitioners, from face-to-face meetings and story pitches, through to speaking to the media as a company spokesman.

The guide tackles the delivery of speeches and presentations, touching on the importance of body language and style.

Electronic communication, including email and telephone, is also explored in terms of the etiquette required to operate them as a business professional.

Language is at the heart of communication. Terminology, grammar, punctuation and spelling are all important to being a professional communicator. The credibility and reputation of both you and your client are at stake when you act as a PR consultant or spokesperson; you are representing your client, often in a context where critical information is being shared. They will expect, and you should deliver, professional, businesslike and accurate communications – written and spoken – which use technically correct and accessible language.
1 Audiences

Internal verbal communications

Internal communications may be less formal than the communications you have with clients or people external to your organisation. However, you must still follow relevant company protocol. You may communicate verbally with colleagues when you are face to face, on the phone or via video link. You will use your verbal communications skills internally when you give instructions, ask and answer questions, consult, negotiate and solve conflicts, deliver presentations, and even when you leave voicemail messages.

External verbal communications

Client meetings

Over time, you may get to know your clients very well and build up a special rapport with them, which can even turn into a personal relationship. However, to begin with, it is best to remember that all your client relationships should be, and remain, professional. To that extent, a professional relationship means communicating using a tone and language that is suitable for the workplace and that written outputs conform to an accepted business framework.

Effective communication in this context involves using progress reports, agendas and planning meetings as vehicles to establish productive dialogue. It means first of all listening to the client so that you can pick up the major points and the nuances they are trying to get across. Above all, communication is two way – you need to establish dialogue, not monologue.

Checklist

Face-to-face client conversations should generally:
- be formal and take place within an agenda/meeting format
- have decisions recorded via meeting minutes
- be open, positive and polite in tone
- use appropriate business language and terminology
- happen in a place of work, not a coffee bar, for example.

Pitching to journalists

Pitching a story is the final link in the media relations chain – a task not relished by many PR practitioners and often delegated to junior members of the team. Many people find it hard to talk to a journalist on the phone or face to face.

However, many journalists are less intimidating than they might seem – the trick is to get to them at the right moment and present your idea in the right format, and at speed. This means doing a lot of homework on your story or feature idea before you meet or pick up the phone. When the question ‘What is the story?’ is asked, be sure to have an answer. Anticipate questions and have answers ready. Understand
the strength of the story you are offering or the attraction of the features package you are putting together.

Broadly speaking there are several areas you need to cover if you are going to increase your hit rate:

- Know the title you are pitching to: if you haven't even read the publication, don't know what the journalist has been covering or don't have a grasp of the readership, you are likely to fall at the first hurdle.
- Build relationships face to face where possible: there is everything to gain and nothing to lose by making contact with a journalist and buying them a cup of coffee or a quick lunch to establish where your mutual interests lie. Like every other walk of life, success is sometimes about who you know and building personal trust.
- Have a story or a few feature ideas ready when you speak to or meet up with a journalist. If you don't, it will be a missed opportunity and they are less likely to see you as a fertile source for copy in the future.
- Focus on putting together timely and interesting feature packages that contain:
  - a news hook
  - a good, articulate spokesperson
  - a relevant case study
  - access to powerful images that complement your story.
- Develop an understanding of how each journalist likes to be pitched to. Is it via a phone call, follow-up email and then second phone call, or is it just an email with the headline in the title bar? Or is it an opening pitch idea on the phone, followed by a meeting?

### Media interviews

A well-executed media interview is a powerful tool for communicating with and influencing a wide range of people. However, while media engagement offers an opportunity for communicating positive stories, it also carries a risk.

For many people, from experienced to novice, the media interview is a stressful event, doubly so when they are under attack. Interviewees want a positive outcome to the experience, but need to understand that what they say and do could yield the opposite result. Say the right thing, you can make headlines. Say the wrong thing, and you can still make headlines!

Although each interview will vary, depending on factors such as format, audience and location, the broad process is common to all, as are the proven techniques for delivering effective media interviews. Whether you are highly experienced or a novice, with careful preparation and continuing practice and exposure, you can become a more effective communicator in both good times and bad.

An effective interview hinges on your confidence, control and credibility.

- Confidence enables you to go into an interview situation as an equal and enthusiastic participant, knowing that you know your material.
- Control enables you to communicate your message clearly, even in tough situations.
- Credibility enables you to articulate a story that your audience believes.
The concept of ‘control’ includes managing your demeanour, your presentation, your language, your message and your handling of questions. Most importantly, it means taking an active role in steering the interview towards your objectives, rather than the reporter’s – creating and seizing opportunities to assert your own agenda, rather than being passively directed and controlled by the questions you are asked.

**Checklist**

**Media interviews**
- Use key messages.
- Set objectives: decide in advance what you want to say in relation to the media outlet, its audience and the topic.
- Focus on your key message(s) – each should be a statement that positively positions your organisation, that includes some facts, and that you can then explain further (telling the story behind the headline).
- Key messages usually combine facts, opinion and evidence/proof points.
- Use the key messages repeatedly and weave them throughout your dialogue.
- Don’t wait for the right question to give your key message – treat any question as a prompt to talk about your prime focus.

**Delivering presentations and speeches**

Write your speech down, but try not to read from it. If you have written it down and you dry up, you will be able to pick it up again. It can help to make an audio or video recording of your presentation when you practise. You can play it back to find out which parts sound weak and fix them.

It is better not to read from your notes, unless you have frozen or not prepared, as it can sound flat and stilted. If you have learned your speech it should sound natural and you will have the chance to ad lib if the opportunity arises.

When you speak, try to speak with passion and enthusiasm but not too quickly. If you speak passionately it will make up for many other shortcomings. The power of pausing in a presentation can be very profound. It will also give you chance to catch your breath.

Key points to consider:
- **Avoid jargon:** make sure you use appropriate language for your audience and avoid using vocabulary with which only a specialist audience will be familiar.
- **Always leave handouts:** you have gone to a lot of effort to produce your presentation. Leaving handouts will reinforce your messages, and will help your audience to remember your presentation when they look at them again. Always include your details so that the audience can contact you.
- **Body language:** all presenters get nervous before a presentation, even the most experienced. Like an actor giving a performance, even when you have given hundreds, the fear never entirely goes away. It is a combination of adrenaline and testosterone (which affects both men and women). Learn how
to harness it, just like an athlete does. Start by taking a few deep breaths to lower your pulse rate and steady your nerves…

- **The eyes have it:** maintain good eye contact with the audience. Don’t keep contact with only one group – spread your attention around the room. An idea that works well is ‘quartering’: divide the room into four parts, pick an individual in each part and look directly at them in turn. And don’t ignore the people at the back – make sure you make eye contact with them as well.

- **Don’t lock your knees:** when you get to the lectern, unlock your knees and act as if you were about to catch a ball. It will relax you and make your speech flow much more smoothly. You can also anchor yourself against something solid so you don’t waver around.

- **Open posture:** keep an open posture and don’t slouch, fold your arms or weave about evasively. Some shyness and nerves are OK but a speaker who is physically shrinking away from an audience, or is unwilling to engage wholeheartedly, becomes uncompelling and frustrating to watch.

- **Voice tone:** remember that an open posture will help your voice tone, modulation and volume – all vital tools to presenting memorably. Your aim is to dominate the space and make it your own.

**Figure 7.3.1: Things to remember when giving a speech or presentation**

![Diagram](image)

### 2 Electronic communication

**Email etiquette**

So much communication takes place via email, whether with internal colleagues, clients or media contacts, that it pays to know and observe the basics rules of email etiquette. As with any business communication, you need to keep emails businesslike and to the point. We all suffer from email overload, so bear in mind that yours is always going to be in a queue alongside others and will always be read within the context of time pressure.

Therefore you should keep salutations brief, put the subject of the email in the header, and then use bullet points or breaks to separate your subject matter into manageable chunks. Remember, no one can digest huge chunks of copy without breaks, least of all online, so it is most effective to break up the content into short paragraphs.
However, email is a much more informal medium than a letter, so you have more slack in both your format and content. But beware of taking liberties in email by being too informal, for example with clients, and don’t make them read anything they don’t really need to know. That way, they will come to treat your emails seriously.

**Telephone etiquette**

In a PR context, telephone conversations, alongside emails, are your principal source of communication. Therefore, a professional telephone manner is paramount to the way in which you are perceived.

As a general rule, it pays to observe the courtesies you would expect yourself, so try not to be too brusque or too familiar. After all, telephone conversations are just an extension of your face-to-face conversations, so they need to be professional, organised and polite.

As with presentations and speeches, preparation pays off, especially when you have one chance to make a case, sell a story or develop a new contact. Try to prepare the points you want to cover before the call by setting them out in bullet point form; make sure you don’t forget anything important and be prepared to take notes as you speak. Sometimes you will be asked to make a record of the conversation for inclusion in a monthly progress report, for example.

Journalists can be especially unforgiving towards PR practitioners who contact them on the phone and are then unable to follow through with a coherent story pitch. You often only get one chance, so rehearse the conversation in your head, or even role-play it with a colleague before going live.

**Portfolio activity**

Choose at least three situations you encounter as part of your role, or in a simulated workplace environment agreed in advance with your tutor in which you need to communicate verbally. Set up a way of recording the communications or ensure your tutor is present.

1. For each situation choose an appropriate style and structure and use this to communicate with or present to different PR audiences.

2. Evaluate the success of your verbal communications – did you get across the information you needed to? Were your communications well received by your audience? Did you make the impact you intended? Suggest improvements that you would make if you had to present to or communicate with the same audience again.
Jane Down, 26, is a senior account executive at a large PR consultancy in London. She is extremely busy, with up to 80 per cent of her time at work billable to clients, rather than spent on internal administration or management. Jane has three retained clients and two projects on the go at any one time. She is primarily responsible for implementing the media relations aspects of the accounts. This means she spends her time in any given week researching, drafting and distributing news releases on behalf of clients to target media and bloggers; she is also managing a news-led Twitter feed.

Because her clients are largely consumer facing (B2C), Jane has become an expert on the nationals, key regionals, consumer and lifestyle magazines, broadcast shows and online consumer websites that carry news. She knows some consumer affairs correspondents personally and is able to pick up the phone to many others if she needs to sell-in a story or offer an exclusive. The hit rate for her stories is high, as she understands the dynamics of news, can write an effective news release and pitch a story by email or on the phone.

Jane is extending her media relations skills by developing feature ideas and packages, which she is beginning to pitch to features editors. She is also working more closely with a couple of professional photographers to develop picture stories and visual angles to make her outputs more attractive.

This week, for the first time, Jane has been asked to draft a speech for the CEO of one of her clients. She is doing background research and putting together some ideas to meet a brief for a 15-minute speech with slides to be delivered next month.

Further reading
About the author

Vyvyan Kinross has been in PR consultancy for 30 years. Vyvyan started his career as a journalist with IPC Business Press, specialising in coverage of trade, economics, health and transport issues across the Middle East. In 1987, he founded his own successful agency with a business partner, and grew the agency into a top-50 PR firm over the next 15 years with clients including the Department of Trade and Industry, Department of Health, Shell, Xerox and UPS. In 2004, he started silverFox PR & Communications Training to develop a series of learning and development programmes for industry professionals and for those wanting to develop their knowledge and skills in the PR business. Vyvyan is a PRCA-approved trainer, a member of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and a faculty member of the Management School London, teaching a wide variety of subjects.