

# PRWeek

## OP-ED Too much talk complicates comms

I met with a senior agency executive the other day for about an hour – of which I think I spoke for seven minutes. The guy literally didn't shut up. If I hadn't interrupted to say it was time to go, we might still be sitting there.

This was not an isolated incident. Unfortunately, a huge number of communications professionals have poor listening skills, combined with diarrhea of the mouth. Somehow, it seems that listening fell off the list of qualities needed to be a good communicator, and this is a shame because good communications is about brevity, clarity, and economy.

Korn/Ferry did a survey of its recruiters last year and asked them to identify the most common interview mistakes candidates commit. The number one answer: talking too much. This is not surprising – I have literally watched candidates talk themselves out of a job by not knowing when to shut up.

After considering this epidemic of endless talkers, I've identified three archetypes of PR pros who suffer from excessive verbosity:

**Type 1: Commander McBrag.** You've met this woman before. She's so obsessed with telling you what her title was, whom she reported to, the reporters she knows, and the people she supervised that

she's never bothered to check if you're interested in these facts. While selling yourself is important, it's equally important to listen and understand the needs of the client. I've always thought that one of the most effective ways to win business or to ace a job interview is to impress the client with the quality of the questions you ask and the insights you bring in probing for more information.

### I have watched candidates talk themselves out of a job by not shutting up

**Type 2: Circuitous driver.** This is the guy whose voicemails you dread. He needs seven minutes to convey a 15-second message. His issue is not self-obsession; he just can't seem to get to the point. Anyone who has worked with senior executives knows that the most precious commodity in the corporate suite is time – if you waste it, you will not be invited back.

**Type 3: Way too much information.** This woman lives by the adage "Ask me what time it is, and I'll tell

you how to build a watch." She was born without the filter that determines when sufficient data has been supplied on a given topic. She feels compelled to tell you not just that the annual report is late, but also why the printer overbooked the presses, how hard the color separation process is, and how bad the traffic is downtown.

Earlier in my career I worked for Nissan, and we faced the prospect of a *60 Minutes* crew coming to investigate safety defects. We hired John Scanlon, who had represented CBS in its libel battle against Gen. William Westmoreland, and we assembled a team of engineers to explain what *60 Minutes* was likely to focus on. Midway through the meeting, Scanlon grew frustrated and finally said: "Guys, guys, you're boring the crap out of me. *60 Minutes* is not going to focus on anything this arcane or complex – give me the 30-second sound-bite that you fear the most."

So let me get to the point: Good communications should be simple and clear. Perhaps Walt Whitman said it best, when he wrote, "The art of art, the glory of expression, and the sunshine of the light of letters, is simplicity." ■

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