



Assessing Feedback

The Surefire Way to Achieve Your Professional Goals

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Barks Communications

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Keep up to date with the latest from Ed — and receive a free copy of his book *Insider Strategies for the Confident Communicator: How to Master Meetings, Presentations, Interviews, and Advocacy* — when you sign up for his Communications Community newsletter at <https://bit.ly/CommsCommunityInsiderBook>.

Ed likes to hear from his readers. [Email him](#)., call (703) 533-0403, and visit him online at www.barkscomm.com.

Former New York Mayor Ed Koch was famous for asking one basic question of his constituents: “How’m I doin’?” Hizzoner believed in constantly taking the pulse of his key audience: New York City voters.

Those of us who deal with the public in any form should assume Koch’s attitude by making a conscious effort to assess our abilities and gauge how we might best improve over time.

I tell my clients that they can move themselves ahead of the crowd by conscientiously evaluating how they perform. Why? Nearly everyone else ignores it. Most of us have witnessed speakers who audibly exhale and mop their brow upon finishing their remarks. They think they’re done. Not even close.

Real pros examine their performance to determine what worked and what didn’t. They ask colleagues for insights. They read comments on evaluation forms. They review the video.

If you strive for improvement over time, Assessing Feedback is the way to go.

This paper reports on such critical exchanges as:

- Reaching out to the public through executive speeches
- Engaging in media interviews
- Providing Congressional testimony
- Delivering presentations before audiences large and small, external and internal
- Advocating before policymakers

Media training will often be used as an example here. It is important to point out, however, that these principles apply to any type of communications learning, whether it concerns public speaking, Congressional testimony, internal workplace conversations, or any of the wide range of other formats.

The Root of the Problem

Many executives believe they are too busy to focus on improving their communications skills on a sustained basis. And too many communications strategy consultants and in house staff are content to let them off the hook.

If I had a nickel for every time I had to bite my tongue upon hearing someone claim to have been “media trained,” I’d have long ago retired to that villa in Tuscany.

Many communications training workshops focus extensively on simulated exercises. Some also emphasize messaging, depending on your needs and the abilities of the consultant you engage. Your particular circumstances and your spokespeople's level of skill dictate how to balance those aspects.

The sad fact is many training programs lack a crucial third aspect: Sharpening participants' communications edge over the long run. This is where assessing feedback comes into play. It has been my observation over many years that sustained professional development gets short shrift.

There are several reasons for this lax attitude:

1. The company has no organized professional development program relative to the communications skills of its spokespeople
2. All they want is a quick one-and-done workshop so they can say they checked the media training box
3. The executives who participate in the workshop think they are too busy to pay sustained attention to their communications skills
4. The company has failed to allocate the appropriate budget
5. Another department has hijacked your consultant selection and training processes
6. The internal staff that bears much of the load for ongoing message and skill sharpening is under-equipped or subpar professionally
7. The communications consultant doesn't really care about long-term value
8. It's not part of the marketplace's communications training culture

Let's take a deep dive into these factors and how you can address them.

1. LACK OF A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

This is an internal struggle that demands an assertive communications or government relations department. Most companies of any size dedicate budget dollars to employee learning. Sometimes communications fails to get its fair share of the pie. How can you fight for inclusion? Make the case that reputation matters. Find examples of how a media campaign aided another firm (or a lack of media presence damaged another). Develop internal champions in the C-suite who will go to bat for you. Utilize your communications consultants to help you.

2. CHECKING THE MEDIA TRAINING BOX

It happens in some organizations. Someone high in the pecking order has mandated that media training take place after a poor performance in front of the camera by one of your spokespeople. It's left in the hands of a harried or inexperienced communications staff to make it happen. No one has a real stake in the outcome. They just want to be able to check that to-do off their list. If you sense this happening in your business, suggest that the powers that be undertake a serious search for a reputable and experienced expert. "A Buyer's Guide to Communications Training Consultants" can help. In fact, why not forward a copy to the individual leading your search.

3. EXECUTIVES WHO THINK THEY ARE TOO BUSY

Your communications strategy consultant should be able to bear much of the load here. Once your executives have undergone a media training workshop, they may believe that all of their skill sharpening has to take place in a formal setting that soaks up hours of their day. Not so. For example, I encourage my clients to take advantage of those spare moments before meetings and casual hallway encounters as practice opportunities. Review your notes and messaging when you gain "found time" even if it's just 10 minutes. Ask colleagues to pepper you with questions on random occasions. To be sure, a solid professional development plan will encompass added formal workshops every so often. Just remember, not every step needs to be that time consuming.

4. LACK OF BUDGET COMMITMENT

If you have responsibility for directing your company's communications or government affairs department, it is up to you to include communications training as part of your budgeting process. Decide how many of your executives require this type of professional development and how intensive each one's program should be. You may be able to tap *their* professional development budgets, though understand that amount may not be sufficient and may demand an additional budget commitment.

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5. SOMEONE ELSE HIJACKED YOUR HIRING PROCESS

It is up to you, as the senior communications or government relations executive, to secure the consultant who best suits your situation. When the time comes for developing public speaking or media relations talents, your communications shop must take the lead. When Congressional testimony or a [Capitol Hill fly-in](#) is in the offing, the government relations experts need to steer the ship. A word of caution: Do not slough this job off on another department as some companies tend to do. Experience shows that this leads to frustration and poor results by adding another layer of needless bureaucracy. Finding a consultant with expertise in your specific domain is your strong suit, and yours alone.

6. A STAFF IN OVER ITS HEAD

Your company's communications staff may be smart yet inexperienced. Or they may not be up to the job (it happens; everybody's gotta work somewhere). The hard truth is you must figure out a way to work around these shortfalls. Your messaging and spokesperson development are too important. A subpar staff is sure to ding your reputation sooner or later. Your communications consultant should be able to pick up some of the slack, but you also need to employ a capable staff. If they are bright but naive, invest in their professional advancement — quick. If they are hopeless (I realize this sounds harsh, but your top business and public policy goals are at risk), get rid of them and hire more capable hands.

7. YOUR CONSULTANT DOESN'T CARE

Some advisors prefer one-off sessions. One colleague with whom I've collaborated is very open about this. He is top notch, but he doesn't like extended engagements. He is not shy about the fact that he doesn't want to see those executives ever again. That's not my cup of tea. I'd much rather guide someone to improvement over the long run. It advances both your company's reputation and everyone's career. Make sure you clarify this issue with your prospective consultant before signing on the dotted line.

8. THE MARKETPLACE'S MEDIA TRAINING CULTURE

This has been a continuing source of frustration during my 25-plus years in business. Media training is sometimes viewed as a [commodity](#). I have long tried to swim against this tide yet admit to having little success. Oh, there are occasional victories with certain clients, but overall it's a tough battle. Big marketplace; small me.

Stepping on Your Own Messaging

Any of the above deficiencies reduces the impact of your messaging. Why does that matter? It may cause you to fall short of your business and public policy objectives. Take the example of Boeing's stumbles following the crashes of two of its 737 MAX jets. As reported by the *Seattle Times*, "By many accounts, Boeing's public-relations operation has been bureaucratic and slow during the crisis, often taking hours or days to issue statements or respond to reporters." Airliner crashes should not be an unanticipated crisis for an aircraft manufacturer.

They don't know precisely where or when an accident will take place, but it's coming eventually. Messaging and media training surrounding this foreseeable type of crisis should be a routine occurrence no matter the size or scope of your issue or crisis.

Implementing the Plan

Every executive who faces your public deserves a professional development plan that leads them to becoming more effective communicators when [speaking](#) in public, [dealing with the media](#), and influencing [policymakers](#).

The specifics of the plan will vary in accordance with each individual's needs. Some require ongoing tutelage. Consider the numbers cruncher whose company called me in. It was clear from our first encounter that it was going to take some time and effort to get her up to speed as a media spokesperson. To her great credit, she took her sustained professional development seriously, knowing that it had a direct impact on her career advancement possibilities. She practiced diligently after that first session. You could have fooled me at our next get together one month later. Her responses were far more cogent, tight, and message driven. It was as if a new spirit had taken over her being.

Other executives need only occasional reminders. Take the example of the CEO who already had some experience dealing with reporters. Her performance and the insightful questions she raised during our media training workshop indicated a skill level that needed only occasional polish and refreshing. She makes it a point to follow my [C-suite Blueprint](#) blog, which publishes weekly. I was touched to receive a note from her months after our work together saying that she always learns something from those blog posts. It is moments like that that keep me energized.

As these two differing cases illustrate, every situation is unique. You should never permit your consultant to squeeze your executives into a one-size-fits-all box. When it comes to devising a sustained program, you deserve to know the answers to such questions as:

- What does my program look like?
- What elements are included?
- What books or other learning materials does your consultant provide?

- What steps can we manage internally?
- When and how often does your consultant need to get involved?
- How long will it take to implement?

Don't expect a *War and Peace*-like tome. Neither you nor your C-suite have time to digest that. One or two pages that highlight specific action steps will suffice. It should contain specifics while allowing for some flexibility as your situation evolves.

FULFILLING YOUR COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY NEEDS

Smart businesses rely on Barks for more than media training. Call on us when:

- Your CEO grumbles about your company's message development and delivery capabilities
- Your C-suite struggles to get your communications and government relations teams to play nice together
- Your business needs an unbiased point of view on where your communications risks and rewards lurk
- Your legal, finance, and marketing teams fail to deliver a consistent and concise message
- You need to expand your professional development choices
- Your technical experts shy away from media interviews
- Your CEO is planning a high stakes speech or media opportunity
- Your business faces challenges onboarding communications and government relations staffers
- Your communications personnel tremble when trying to counsel the C-suite
- Your government relations staff needs to ramp up the performance of your advocates when they deal with policymakers

Curious how we can help you with these issues? Get in touch with Ed at (703) 533-0403.

Nuts and Bolts

What is a communications executive to do in order to gauge “How’m I doin’?” Follow these steps. First, instruct your communications and government relations staff — in concert with your communications strategy consultant — to develop communications improvement plans for every executive who speaks for you in any type of public forum.

Yes, there is work entailed here for you’ll want to set forth separate plans for each spokesperson. Additionally, you’ll need sub-plans for each one’s media, presentations, and testimony efforts.

What do these plans look like? Here, too, don’t worry about laying out a lengthy tome. One page for each mode should suffice. That is, one page for your CEO’s media outreach, another for public speaking campaigns, and a third for public policy ventures.

Make these plans specific. For example, indicate the need for a series of quarterly follow up media training workshops to better develop message discipline. Or commit to continuing their journey with a round of low risk speaking engagements. Another facet for those who lack a public policy background could be a primer on Congressional committees, their members, and how they work.

Also, spell out what areas need focus. If your CEO has the knack for framing your messages, work to shine a spotlight on that. If, on the other hand, they exhibit low nonverbal abilities, indicate which particular qualities — perhaps enhancing eye contact or varying vocal pitch — require sharpening.

Clearly, if you are dealing with a handful of executives, you’ll need to set out two distinct paths forward for them. This is what happened with one corporation I worked with. Two of their executives needed sharper public speaking skills. After working with them twice, it became clear their ongoing needs diverged somewhat. While they both needed help streamlining their messaging, one needed to get her eye contact under control while the other had some work to do cutting the clutter from his verbiage. Thus, we crafted separate sustained professional development plans for each one.

You Must Lead the Charge

It falls to communications and government relations executives to blaze the path. Your C-suite deals daily with an overflowing plate, which means that improving their communications skills on a sustained basis is simply not top of mind (until crisis strikes, when it’s already too late). Too many communications strategy consultants and staffers are content to give them a pass. The smart ones refuse to fall into that trap.

Neglecting the need to devise and implement a strategic professional development plan reduces the impact of your messages. This means you struggle whenever you try to move your business and public policy objectives forward.

Every executive who faces your public needs a professional development plan that makes them more effective communicators when delivering any type of presentation, dealing with reporters, and influencing government leaders.

It's up to you as your company's resident communications or government relations expert to remedy this deficit. It is critical for you to insist on formulating communications improvement plans — plans that will serve your C-suite over the long run — for everyone who speaks for you in any type of public forum. Both your company and your career stand to benefit.

About Ed Barks

Ed Barks is a business author and communications strategy consultant. His corporate and association clients hire him to provide them with the messages and everyday communications skills their executives need.

He shows them how to gain an enhanced reputation, greater confidence, added opportunities for career advancement, and realization of long-term business and public policy goals.

Ed is the author of [four books for communications and government relations experts](#), and for executives who represent the public face of their companies:

- *Insider Strategies for the Confident Communicator: How to Master Meetings, Presentations, Interviews, and Advocacy*
- *Reporters Don't Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies*
- *A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications: Turning Today's Leaders into Tomorrow's Influencers*
- *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*

Clients who turn to him for strategic advice 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 counsel “two thumbs up!”

As President of Barks Communications since its founding in 1997, Ed has guided more than 5500 business leaders, association executives, thought leaders, and communications and government relations professionals toward a sharper message and enhanced communications skills.

He is also the founder and community leader of the [C-suite Blueprint blog](#).

Keep up with the latest from Ed by [joining his Communications Community](#). Join now and **get Ed's latest book with his compliments**.

Visit him online at www.barkscomm.com. He enjoys hearing from readers, so contact him at (703) 533-0403 or ebarks@barkscomm.com.

