



# A Buyer's Guide to Communications Strategy Consultants

Ed Barks

© 2025 Edward J. Barks

Ninth edition

Barks Communications

[www.barkscomm.com](http://www.barkscomm.com)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the express written consent of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a critical article or review.

No part of this publication may be used or reproduced by any means for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

Every word and thought in this paper was written by a living, breathing human being. No artificial intelligence schemes were used. Remedies for violation of copyright laws by users, whether intentional or unintentional, may be pursued.

***Communications Strategy***

***Message Refinement***

***Media Training***

***Presentation Skills Perfection***

***Congressional Testimony Performance***

***(703) 533-0403***

***ebarks@barkscomm.com***

### **Prologue**

It is safer to place a racetrack wager on a horse bound for the glue factory than to stoop to “winging it” when communicating in public.

How do astute companies prepare their C-suite and other spokespeople for the give-and-take when facing the press, public, and lawmakers? They seek outside counsel in the form of a committed communications consultant.

This buyer’s guide is designed to help you sort through your options. It also outlines some of the questions to 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 Strategy Consultant?**

The steady hand of a veteran advisor helps to polish your company’s reputation. Top consultants think strategically. They understand how to provide a needed professional development program for your executives. Furthermore, they can talk to them as peers, not supplicants. Sophisticated businesses regularly draw on the expertise of veteran communications counselors.

There are several possible reasons for contracting with a consultant. Among them:

- Your internal staff does not possess the knowledge, experience, or expertise necessary to advise senior executives
- You lack a communications or public affairs strategy
- Your messaging is a mess
- Your spokespeople demonstrate a subpar skill level
- Your communications personnel lacks the knowhow, commitment, and time needed to develop a sustained professional development program
- Your executives need straight talk that your staff fears to deliver
- Your CEO needs an independent sounding board to help solve a vexing communications issue
- Your current communications efforts have proven incapable of producing long-term improvement in your company’s messaging

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

It should be emphasized that a one-and-done approach places your business and public policy goals in jeopardy. What's the solution? It starts with strategy. Once you and your consultant have wrestled that to the ground, you can consider tactics.

For instance, a series of monthly training workshops and consultations may be in order as part of an ongoing professional development program for your C-suite and other spokespeople. Some of them may need to sharpen their communications capabilities while others require more emphasis on message development, refinement, discipline, and delivery. The more issues you confront and the more spokespeople you have, the greater the need for closer and longer lasting attention.

### What Situations Dictate the Need for a Consultant?

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

- Shaping your communications strategy
- Getting your communications and government relations staff on the same page
- [Dealing with the media](#)
- [Delivering presentations](#)
- [Presenting legislative testimony](#) to committees of Congress, state legislatures, or local government bodies
- Appearing as a witness before a regulatory panel
- Onboarding new staff members
- Organizing a [Capitol Hill fly-in](#) for your employees or members

*Savvy businesses insist that their spokespeople undergo communications training on a regular basis.*

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

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

You need to steel your executives, board members, and issue experts to deliver presentations when they:

- Deliver an address to your trade association or professional society designed to catapult you into a leadership role
- Must translate technical jargon into lay language
- Start a thought leadership initiative
- Establish a campaign designed to raise the profile of your CEO
- Pitch to a potential customer
- Deliver internal presentations

Your public policy goals may include:

- A desire to support a bill that directly affects your business
- Government investigation into something you 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 client situation is unique. Moreover, your choice of an expert to guide you through a media thicket today may differ from your selection to help you navigate Congressional testimony tomorrow.

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

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

Additionally, assess your communications advisor's compatibility with your firm. Some prefer to avoid travel and work only with small, local groups; if you represent a Fortune 500 company or a major trade association that is national or global in scope, such individuals will find themselves hopelessly in over their head. Similarly, one who deals primarily with Fortune 1000 clients may prove a poor match for a local non-

profit group both in terms of perspective and budget. Another wrinkle: Some have adapted to remote counseling, others not so much.

The cold, hard truth is you may not find a consultant who meets every one of your criteria 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 your journey to improved communications should be as enjoyable as possible. As one client I've worked with multiple times told me after one of her sessions, "I always forget that this is more fun than I thought it would be." That is not to say I conduct a standup

comedy routine for my clients. But the fact is children are not the only ones who learn better when a sense of amusement and curiosity is part of the learning environment. Adult learners deserve some merriment and inspiration, too. Something to consider if the consultants you interview come across as cold fish.

*"What's my reaction to an Ed Barks training? Two thumbs up!"*

David J. Walsh  
Retired President/CEO  
Amalgamated Life Insurance

### **Is Your Consultant Really an Authority?**

You need to ascertain a couple of key facts right from the get-go. Make these the very first questions you ask a prospective consultant, for media, presentation skills, and advocacy training play a large part in your overall success:

- Do you focus exclusively on communications training?
- What percentage of your business is dedicated to training?
- How much experience do you have specific to the communications training field?
- How do you demonstrate your thought leadership in the communications training discipline?

Why are these issues paramount? Communications training is a highly skilled niche that demands a considered strategy. Your consultant should be dedicated to advancing their learning day after day, year after year.

Watch out, for a pack of wannabes 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.

### **Beware the Pseudo-training Consultant**

The first danger factor: Many agencies — even recognizable global names — are now populated by less experienced workers. Agencies that once maintained outstanding communications training departments have, in many 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 account person.

How do you address this risk? You have the right to press for the specific name of the advisor who will lead your sessions. Any reputable agency will not hesitate to provide you with a copy of your consultant's biographical sketch before you sign any agreement. Read that bio carefully to ensure a heavy emphasis specific to their bona fides in the communications training discipline. After all, you deserve more than a generalist public affairs hand or publicist, no matter the level of seniority.

The second prospective pitfall for you: Public relations agency and corporate job cuts have tossed a lot of hungry people out on the street. Many were forced to go it alone in a sometimes challenging job market. 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 knock out a news release, claim a sudden expertise in digital media, 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 inherent with communications training, you would be cheating yourself and endangering your company 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. Similarly, consider your communications training consultant as your specialist when it comes to forging and delivering your message and honing your communications skills.

### **You Don't Need Another Technician**

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

*Ask for the name of the individual who will lead your program. You have the right to press for a specific name, experience level, and a copy of your consultant's biographical sketch.*

cybersecurity, health care, finance, or any other discipline. You have plenty of experts on staff to deal with technical questions that arise.

Your advisor is there to take on the role of sherpa with regard to how your message plays in public and how to convey that message, not in the technical specs of your latest product. Yes, they should have an acquaintance with your issues. But remember, you are not bringing on board another set of hands to explain every scintilla of minutia. Rather, you are seeking counsel from someone with the knowledge to help you elevate your reputation.

True, your consultant must keep their learning up to date, so don't hesitate to inquire about their own professional development. What books, training guides, articles, and videos have they produced? What research have they conducted? The cream of the crop researches, publishes, and presents findings regularly.

### **Avoid the Assembly Line**

You also want to ensure that your training consultant custom tailors a workshop specifically for you. A consumer goods business confronted with a data breach 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 advisor's philosophy on targeted vs. one-size-fits all programs is to listen. When you interview them, do they mention the PowerPoint slide deck they show to each and every client? That is probably a sign of a cookie cutter approach. Do they tell you everyone will rehearse television interviews during the training? Again, a bad sign if your plans include outreach only to bloggers or the trade press. A straightjacketed approach does you no good.

Any communications consultant worth hiring has a variety of flexible learning modules they 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 all those arrows in my quiver.



Make it a point to inquire what modules your potential consultant maintains. You will need only a fraction of them in any given workshop, but knowing what they have developed over the years (assuming they have been in business longstanding, of course) gives you a glimpse into their capabilities and tells you they devote plenty of thought to your ongoing professional development.

### **Creating a Magnetic Message**

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

I ask to see a company's existing messaging in preparation for every engagement. What do I encounter most often? Sadly, two cases are most prevalent. First is the business that has never committed its messages to writing. This means we have lots of work to do. Second is the four- to five-page laundry list of disjointed bullet points that serves only to overload and confuse spokespeople. Neither approach stands up to the pressure in the court of public opinion.

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

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

Rather, ask them about their approach to message development. If they tell you about sound methods they use to logically construct messages, that is a good sign. If, on the other hand, the explanations sounds nebulous or they just rattle 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 their approach is to ask what they have written on the subject. They should be enthusiastic about sharing any articles, columns, or excerpts from books they have authored to demonstrate their proficiency.

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

*“Once a client accepts my recommendation of working with Ed, I can relax because I know they’ll be 100 percent satisfied.”*

Robin Snyder  
Former Senior VP/Director of Media Relations  
Ketchum Public Relations

The same principle pertains to guides designed to advance your ongoing professional development. Some advisors offer books, research reports, and position papers while others provide only a few quick-copied sheets. You need to decide which format you prefer.

### **Let’s Go to the Video**

Your advisor should be accustomed to recording to video every simulated interview that occurs during a training workshop. And they should play back and critique the experiential exercises. Reviewing the video is, in my experience, by far the most powerful learning technique for most people. Seeing is believing.

And don’t let those video clips gather dust. Watch it now, then revisit it periodically after your workshop. Reviewing your video is a great professional development tool, provided you continue to reevaluate your performance in the weeks and months that follow.

A word about video arrangements for in person sessions: Insist that your consultant 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 consultant to focus on the flow of the workshop and not get bogged down in starting and stopping a camera, rearranging furniture for different interview formats, and cueing playback. Second, they add to the realism of your session. I always insist on professional videographers with field experience shooting TV news. They

know firsthand the techniques that camera operators at the networks use. Moreover, they know how to react if a technical snafu crops up (unlike that nice fellow who specializes in taking wedding videos on weekends). This added dimension better prepares you for your real-life encounters.

### **Pivoting on a Dime**

Be sure your 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 consultation, a pro should be able and willing to adjust to late-breaking developments in order to enhance the success of your session and, more important, your business goals.


Looking at the other side of that coin, avoid those who leave all preparation to a mad, last minute scramble. That is a sure recipe for a slipshod, disorganized session that may do you more harm than good.

Part of your commitment involves furnishing 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 preparatory meetings to discuss strategy (either in person or via telephone or video conference). In addition, expect to make yourself available for several quick, informal phone conversations and email exchanges. This is not to waste your valuable time, but to ensure that your workshop is organized to create the most beneficial outcome possible.

In the end, the onus is on the consultant to marshal the necessary materials. This also includes background they dig up on their own. My clients are sometimes surprised to hear what I unearth when conducting my independent research. I often get my hands on resources they have not considered or hear chatter from sources to which they do not have access.

This type of independent research on your advisor'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 communications consultant does not need to be an expert in your field. You already have plenty of issue experts.*

## Finding the Right Communications Strategy Consultant

<b>Barks vs. others</b>	Barks	Global agency	Mid-size agency	Solo PR generalist	Internal Staff
Thorough communications knowledge	✓	✓	✓	?	?
Dedicated and experienced communications experts	✓	✓	?	?	?
Good fit for Fortune 1000, Inc. 500	✓	✓	?	X	N/A
Good fit for large associations	✓	✓	?	X	N/A
Rapid response time	✓	✓	?	✓	✓
Project-based, not hourly, metered fees	✓	?	?	?	N/A
Sustained attention to enhance your professional development	✓	?	?	?	✓
Custom-tailored program that suits your needs	✓	?	?	?	✓
Flexibility	✓	?	✓	✓	✓
Message refinement capabilities	✓	✓	?	?	?
Regular access to senior communications experts	✓	✓	?	?	?
Media/public speaking experience	✓	?	?	?	?
Ethical guidelines	✓	?	?	?	?
Ability to offer straight talk to your senior executives	✓	?	?	?	?
Commitment to client privacy	✓	?	?	?	✓

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

## Open the Lines of Communication

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

- a) They are not paying attention to your needs
- b) They are too disorganized to do an effective job for you
- c) They don't care

Any of the above answers are risky propositions. Do not hesitate to back out and go with another option if communication becomes a problem. Better you forfeit your deposit than hazard a decision that could cost your business untold sums in both dollars and reputation.

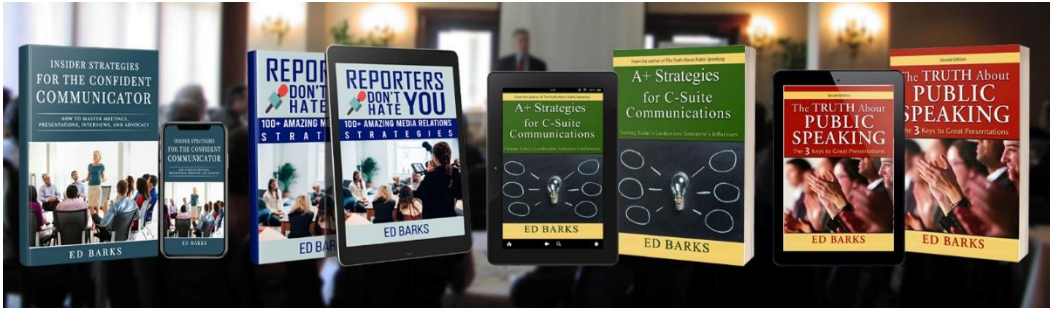
Communication after the fact is also imperative. Some spokespeople make the mistake of thinking they have been “media trained” after a single workshop. That phrase is like fingernails on a chalkboard to my ears. One session does not a smooth spokesperson make.

Your consultant should provide some sort of follow up in an effort to encourage sustained professional development. Seek out assurance that they are not a “here today, gone tomorrow” type, assuming that is important to you (let's hope it is; otherwise, you're not maximizing your valuable budget dollars). For instance, I offer my books:

- [\*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\*](#)

*An intimidated consultant is an ineffective figurehead, while an experienced hand is ready and willing to raise and deal with issues that could get your internal staff reprimanded or fired.*

- [\*The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations\*](#)



Importantly, clients receive follow up telephone and email support as part of each program.

Now, a word or two if your company has a large public relations agency on retainer. As noted earlier, many of those agencies have gutted or done away entirely with once-thriving training departments. 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 with you and your agency's account personnel to develop a curriculum that suits your needs. Reputable agencies who truly have your best interests at heart will accede to your wishes.

### Getting to Know You

How can you perform due diligence on your prospective consultant? First, visit their website. You should, at a minimum, find the basics — philosophy, biography, research reports, articles, contact information, and the like.

If the site fails to emphasize strategy and training capabilities throughout — including on its home page — you should strongly consider looking elsewhere. This is likely a sign of a generalist with little experience specific to the strategic dimensions of communications training.

Hunt for a professional with an online presence that offers resources designed to aid in your learning and to advance your insights into their approach. An array of options designed to encourage your professional development as a communicator are all signs of a consultant who places an emphasis on your sustained growth.

If they lack a website (no, a mere LinkedIn page doesn't count), you are likely dealing with a freelancer and not a business person. I find the lack of a web profile 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 their name in quotation marks (e.g., "Jane Smith") along with the phrase "communications training," "communications strategy," "media training," "presentation skills training," "public speaking," or "Congressional testimony" (that phrase should also be in quotes). Compare the results among the consultants you are considering. If you don't see the outcomes you think you should, you would be wise to expand your pool of candidates and look elsewhere.

I once performed this test when an individual I had never heard of was hired to deliver an address on media training to a professional society. I make it a point to keep up to date with the top consultants and 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 practice of media training. I cannot help but wonder what that audience heard.

*"I have gone through three different training programs, and Ed's was the most beneficial."*

Garry Carneal  
President, Schooner Healthcare Services

Also assess your prospective consultant's presence on various digital media sites. A word of advice: Don't expect to find tracks on every single outlet. People who spend countless hours on such sites probably have too much time on their hands and spend too little of it with their clients.

Take heed of their level of professionalism online. Do they offer sound advice and thought-provoking insights? Or are there nauseatingly regular postings featuring unprofessional photos, the cute new trick their dog learned, or pointless updates from a football game? Remember, you are looking for a professional capable of helping you and your firm achieve your long-term business goals, not a 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 prospective clients 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 consultant; that represents a clear ethical lapse and 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 consultants to put themselves in the shoes of a reporter if they have 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. Do they speak in public often? Does their website prominently mention the topics on which they speak? A subpar or inexperienced speaker normally translates into a poor teacher.

## Dollars and Sense

Expect your consultant to quote you a professional fee on a project basis, though some still offer day or half-day rates. You are engaging your consultant for their expertise, not for their time. Plus, any legitimate professional development plan will take longer than a single day. Any proposal should reflect your specific situation and requirements. Steer clear of obvious one-size-fits-all pitches that make sense only for the consultant, not for you.

Some companies prefer formal proposals; others take a more informal approach, perhaps a letter of agreement, email note, or handshake. No matter your preferred style, make sure you have clarity on these issues:

- 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

Typically, you can anticipate paying a portion of the professional fee at the time you sign your agreement, with the balance due at a series of future dates during your



extended engagement. If you are signing on solely for one workshop, expect to remit the balance on the day of that session.

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

*Skimping on your training budget can get you into hot water when a poorly prepared spokesperson sticks their foot in their mouth.*

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 clients 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 led the communications shop at an association. Although we developed a sophisticated and vigorous internal media training program for our members, we also regularly turned to consultants to reinforce our approach.

We hired some on the cheap and some with gold plating. We usually got what we paid for. One low-budget generalist tried hard, but proved unable to drive home the lessons our members needed. The upscale experts typically earned their keep.

Reputation matters, so if your consultant maintains a high public profile, has authored books, gets involved with organizations that provide them 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 their client list from the rooftops. In fact, in more than a quarter century in business I have never released a client list. The rationale is client-centric. Communications strategy and training is generally a highly confidential experience, given the sensitive issues

encompassed. 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.

### **Honesty and Integrity**

It goes without saying that you want to do business with those who look you in the eye and tell you the truth. Above board conduct is important. This means that, when it comes to ethics, you deserve more than a trite assurance that merely states, “We treat our clients with respect.”

It’s not enough to claim ethical behavior. Rare is the individual who will tell you that they are out to fleece you or that they will take unprincipled shortcuts when collaborating with you. Dig deeper and ask for specifics about [ethical guidelines](#). For example:

- Do they have a written set of ethics policies? If not, that tells you they don’t much care or haven’t thought about it — a risky proposition in either regard.
- Are those guidelines a good fit with your company? You need to feel comfortable with the approach.
- Are the guidelines clear, specific, and practical? Pie-in-the-sky platitudes are meaningless. Check for unambiguous everyday language and meaningful steps in such important areas as truthfulness, conflicts of interest, fee disclosure, and confidentiality.

Additionally, scope out what emphasis your consultant places not only on their own ethical performance, but on encouraging such behavior among their clients when they deal with the media, speak in public, or petition their public officials. After all, a consultant who condones lying in public puts you in jeopardy on a number of fronts. One, it is unethical. Two, it is guaranteed to get you in real trouble somewhere down the road. Three, it will tarnish your professional reputation to the point of no return.

### **Getting the Most from Your Budget**

A word of acknowledgement about budgets: If you are uncomfortable with the numbers proposed by your potential consultant, ask how the scope of the project can be trimmed. Perhaps the mix of elements can be downsized or your internal staff can take on more of the workload. Remember that everything in your proposal is negotiable. It may prove merely a starting point for arriving at the best solution.

It is better to save your pennies and wait than to 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 business. The point here is skimping on your budget can get you into hot water when a poorly prepared spokesperson sticks their foot in their 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 consultant unearth other communications issues that need attention within your enterprise. Expect them 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**

Your consultant's speaking proficiency comes into play in another very practical and budget-friendly way. Many corporations and associations offer professional development opportunities for their officers and executives in conjunction with corporate retreats or national meetings.

Such gatherings typically feature keynote speeches, breakout sessions, and learning labs. Assuming your consultant is an accomplished speaker, [ask them to fill one of those other slots](#), too. While you should expect to pay an added professional fee, the good news is you have an expert already familiar with your situation. Plus, you'll save on travel expenses you would otherwise incur if you were to bring in a separate speaker.

Another option, this one affecting your public policy goals: When you engage your consultant to prepare for a round of crucial Congressional testimony, ask them to prepare your members or employees for your next Capitol Hill fly-in, too.

This leads to one other point about professional fees: Your consultant should give you a break if you sign a contract for multiple engagements. Just be prepared to commit to specific dates and time frames when you sign your agreement.

## **Your Next Step**

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

Applying the recommendations from this buyer's guide will help you identify the individual who best fits your current situation. The right consultant will make life much easier for you as you work to achieve your business and public policy goals.

You have the right to expect the guidance your company deserves to help you achieve a higher communications capability in the weeks, months, and years ahead.

### Appendix

An experienced communications consultant helps you sharpen your abilities to deliver presentations, deal with reporters, and testify before government officials. When you are in the market, use this series of questions to help you select the individual who best suits your needs:

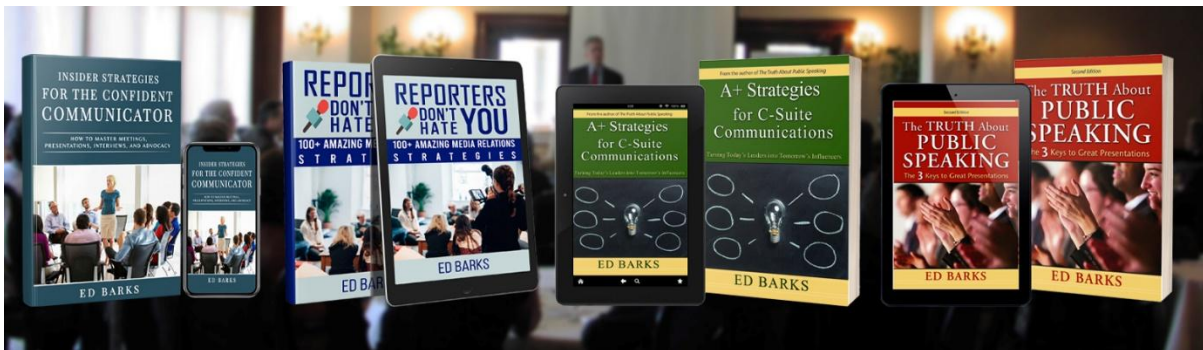
- Do you focus exclusively on communications strategy and training?
- How much experience do you have specific to communications training?
- What percentage of your business involves strategy and training?
- Are you looking for a job? Would you take one if offered and leave me high and dry?
- What is the name of the individual who will lead my program?
- How much independent research do you typically conduct before beginning a client's program?
- What books or guides do you offer participants?
- What books and other publications have you written?
- What is your website address?
- What type of clients do you work with?
- If you are seeking media training: Have you worked in a newsroom?
- If you are looking for presentation skills training: How accomplished a speaker are you?
- Do you prefer extended engagements that lock in our spokespeople's learning or one-off, one-size-fits-all seminars?
- Tell me about your approach to message development.
- If your program occurs in conjunction with a larger meeting: Can you deliver a keynote or breakout session?
- What type of simulations do you utilize?
- Tell me about your commitment to our executives' professional development and to our long-term business goals.
- Do you publish a client list or do you keep your work with us confidential?
- Can you share your written ethics guidelines with me?
- Do you offer a reduced professional fee if I sign an agreement for multiple engagements?
- How do you integrate enjoyment into your workshops?
- To which professional societies do you belong?



Working on extended engagements with Fortune 1000, Inc. 500, and association clients that want to refine their message and sharpen their executives' communications skills.

Delivering an enhanced reputation, more confidence, a brighter career path, and fulfillment of long-term business and public policy goals.

[www.barkscomm.com](http://www.barkscomm.com)



*Order Ed's books today from your favorite bookseller*

[www.barkscomm.com/eds-books](http://www.barkscomm.com/eds-books)

## About the Author

Ed Barks is a communications strategy consultant and author. 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, more 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 5700 business leaders, association executives, thought leaders, and communications and government relations executives toward a sharper message and enhanced communications skills.

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

Visit him online at [www.barkscomm.com](http://www.barkscomm.com). He enjoys hearing from his readers, so contact him at (703) 533-0403 or [ebarks@barkscomm.com](mailto:ebarks@barkscomm.com).