



Alastair Grant

## Boring!

Grant Pearson Brown  
Consulting Ltd.

The Presentation &  
Business Development  
Specialists

Advice *squeezed*  
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By Alastair Grant

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Sometimes I hear a client tell me that they think their presentation will be boring. Such self-fulfilling prophecy adds weight that this might be so. I see the procession of PowerPoint slides stuffed with bullet points and many words. They tell me there are 10 speakers talking that day. Then I know it is going to be a boring presentation.

My claim is that even the most mundane subject can be made interesting. But is that fair advice for a business presentation? Results to the City are surely stacked with figures. A bit of positioning is needed. Results announced to journalists and analysts will be one end of the spectrum. The listeners should know the framework of the subject well. There is a detailed hand-out in front of them. Some presentations do involve the audience in following some grinding detail.

But there is a limit to how much detail they can absorb if they are not already versed in the subject.

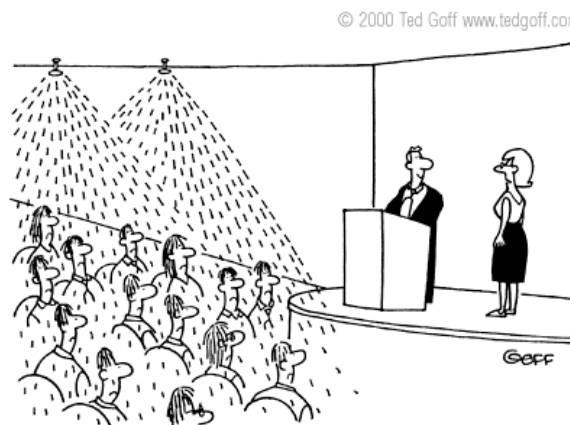
My response here is to ask a simple question: What do you expect the audience to remember afterwards?

Here are some ideas to lower the boredom threshold and increase memorability:

**A good start**

**point** is to establish what you want the audience to recall after the event. It may be helpful to tell them what you are *not* going to talk about. This gives you an excuse to leave out unessential detail yet not appear to have had a memory lapse. A handout or web link can point to the detail that some might need afterwards.

**Strong Start** What you say in the first 100 seconds will, if done well, make the audience lean forward in their seats to hear more. If done badly, apathy and mind wandering set in. Michael Morpurgo recently delivered the Richard Dimbleby Lecture. He spoke with what I can only describe as controlled passion and deep anger about the rights of children. It was never going to be a boring presentation as he started by saying: *Many of us prefer a story to a lecture... It will not be stuffed with statistics. Less is more..... a few will do.....every year 8 million children die in the world before they are 5. That's a holocaust every year.....*



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"You're not allowed to use the sprinkler system to keep your audience awake."

**Relevance** Imagine the audience muttering SO WHAT! after an idea you have passed to them. You should be able to riposte with 'the reason why I tell you this is because...' Better still is to get there first. Fact followed by relevance or benefit to the recipient.

**Verbal Imagery**

This, perhaps more than any other will help you escape the accusation of being boring. Example: Listening to a presentation recently on trends in Asian Markets, we were told that one third of all hair in the world is grown in India. So what? Well as they get more

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## Boring! ...continued

prosperous, so demand for shampoo will increase. Therefore.....

PowerPoint can also be used to provide memorable images. At the same presentation on Asian markets we were shown a slide of a can of Budweiser followed by a can of what we were told is Snow Beer. Snow Beer has the largest volume of sales in the world but it is all in China. Someone suggested we should put in the comparative amounts in hectolitres but even if converted into gallons the figures are so big as to be meaningless. The image of a can of Bud and a can of Snow made the point: The Chinese like drinking Snow Beer. This is part of a trend of their affluent class to adopt western habits. Not boring.

**Tell stories** People will listen to a story and on the underbelly of the story you can hang some detail.

It won't be boring if you link the two strands together - the story and the business message; a bit like a ladder where the rungs link the two strands. The story works best if it is personal, relevant, short and surprising.

**Surprise them** This can be cheesy, but if it is done well it can really help to avoid boredom setting in.

**Write a small play or skit** This sounds too ambitious but can be a spectacular success. Working with a company of food producers we produced a play around what their customers thought of them. The customers were Marks & Spencer, Tesco, Safeways.

It started out as boring and repetitive. But we hit on the idea of each speaker being a school boy reading out his end of term report. *I am Tesco - I have had an excellent term, profit is up by 15%. We have mainly Ford Mondeos in our park and we have beaten M&S into a cocked hat.* We wrote straight scripts but as we rehearsed so the humour was added impromptu.

The audience loved it and it helped end the conference on a high note. The trick is to keep it simple and rehearse from a script.

So the challenge is to reduce the boredom level of your talk by applying a series of ideas and you will be surprised at how the most mundane of subjects can be made interesting.

## The King's speech



**Ewan Pearson**

After Carl's article in December, this is the natural segue. The film 'The King's Speech' has been storming away with prizes, collecting 7 Baftas and 4 Oscars. I could join others in a critique of an excellent film that touches on my world. Instead I want to look at the subject matter - stammering, and what professionals like us with the medical qualifications of Lionel Logue (none) can offer key communicators, none of whom have such afflictions.

Let's be clear, communication coaches are not normally medical doctors. We are people who help the average to good become good to great using techniques and knowledge acquired along the coaching road. Very few are qualified to help someone with the sort of affliction that George VI had.

It is said by those who know better than me that George VI was not as afflicted as Firth portrayed. Art defeated history in many parts of this particular film, for

example the severity of the affliction, and the relationship between coach and client; Logue was more deferential to his King than Geoffrey Rush was to his. But the film is based on the true story of how one man coached another to become a much better communicator. It's what we at GPB, and doubtless many others, aspire to do every day of our lives.

What were George VI's speeches actually like? I have watched many clips of George

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# The King's speech...continued

speaking, and yes he was severely afflicted with an acute stammer, particularly with words starting with h, k, p and t. There were many hesitation pauses. Overall, the impression is of uncertainty and lacking confidence, the latter was true, the former not. He also had an R-W lisp, although he largely got away with that.

By the age of 8 his stammer was already evident, apparently particularly with the letters 'K' and 'Q' (e.g. King and Queen). Whilst the cause is unknown, a very unhappy and unconfident childhood is often suggested.

In 1925, aged 29, at the request of his father, George V, he gave the closing speech of the Empire Exhibition Games to 100,000 people in the new Wembley Stadium. This speech opens the film. It is most painful to watch (see YouTube), made more so by his father's presence, the BBC broadcasting it live to 10 million others, being his first broadcast, comparison with his elder brother Edward's excellent speech the year before. George had an almost allergic reaction. He got sympathy from the crowd, not the intended emotion. He had already tried 9 speech therapists, to no avail.

Lionel Logue was in that Wembley audience. He had arrived with wife Myrtle only the year before from Australia. He had been a speech therapist for 6 years, starting by helping returning Australian WW1 soldiers to get their voices back, with some notable success.

George's appointments with Logue started with a 2-hour session on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1926 to prepare him for his impending 6 month world tour. We often start the same way today. The tour included the opening speech for the new Parliament House in Canberra, Australia.

Logue's notes recall:

*"He entered my consulting room at three o'clock in the afternoon, a slim, quiet man with tired eyes and all the outward symptoms of a man upon whom a habitual speech defect had begun to set the sign. When he left at five o'clock, you could see that there was hope once more in his heart."*

Logue also noted:

*"Good chest development, top lung breathing good. Has never used diaphragm or lower lung - this has resulted through non-control of solar plexus in nervous tension with consequent episodes of bad speech, depression.*

*Contracts teeth and mouth and mechanically closes throat. Gets chin down and closes throat at times. An extraordinary habit of clipping small words (an, in, on) and saying the first syllable of one word and the last in another clipping the centre and very often hesitancy."*



Logue's notes show nearly immediate progress in 1926:

*Oct 30: Diaphragm much firmer, a distinct advance.*

*Nov 16: A good all around improvement much greater control, diaphragm almost under complete control.*

*Nov 18: As he progresses the click in the throat becomes very noticeable as other faults are cleared up. Diaphragm is now forcing air through throat muscles.*

*Nov 19: Never made a mistake during the hour, despite fact very tired.*

*Nov 20: Lower jaw became pliable.*

Logue coached intensively through those first few months, seeing George almost daily, and counting 82 sessions before George left for his tour. Logue gave him self-coaching activities for every day he was away. Again we still do something similar.

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## The King's speech ...continued

Logue believed that George could overcome his stammer, but it would take a tremendous amount of work. He also thought the Duke's problems stemmed from faulty breathing. He invented and prescribed breathing exercises, frequent gargling with warm water, intoning vowels for fifteen seconds each in front of an open window, and hard work - at least one hour of concentrated effort every day. Many of the sessions would be with Logue at his Harley Street office, where the Duke of York would be treated the same as all other patients. Plus ca change.

George was relieved to find that his stammering was not "a mental problem," as some had suggested. Not only was the Duke's opening of Parliament a triumph, the whole tour was successful.

But George was not destined to have an easy time. On 10<sup>th</sup> December 1936, his elder brother Edward VIII abdicated. George was badly affected by this; his stammer and associated bad temper

returned. Whilst the intervals extended, George and Logue continued to work together for many years - through a very successful speech at his own coronation on May 12<sup>th</sup> 1937, the opening of the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow in 1938, and his famous speech at the start of WW2 given at exactly 6pm on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939. By 1951 when he spoke to open the Great Exhibition, George was as cured of his stammer as one can be. You can hear the changes for yourself over the decades.

Logue left a painstakingly detailed archive which explains how the successful coach-client relationship worked. It's also clear that George was a man of great courage, who took the less easy route to speak rather than to delegate that to another. It's also very clear from the archive material that he was very close to and fond of his Australian coach.

Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, agreed that

the story of her husband's affliction could be told, but only after her death.

So what can we learn from this highly emotive story?

1. You have to want to improve, as this is often hard and long work
2. There are techniques that work very well, but these need to be tailored to the individual
3. Qualifications don't count; it's coaching skills and experience that matter
4. Coaching must be positive, encouraging and show hope and optimism
5. Set goals that are personal, not relative to others who you might admire
6. Build up to major events, don't start with one.
7. Coach intensively when needed, but the relationship should be seen as long-term support for key events.



Duke of York / King George VI (Wikipedia.com)

Here are some of Logue's techniques for George's stammer: Breathing exercises, Intone vowels, Get angry, Stay calm, Sing, Swear, Gargle; Say it to me; Find a phonim to tack on the front

(a-pavilion, a-palace, a-the). There are many that apply broadly, such as: Exchange hard-to-say words for easier ones; Mark up the script with stress marks and pauses, pause often, speak slowly.

George spoke at 75 words/minute in 1939 and over 100 by 1957. There is no known recording of him from the 1920s, but we can guess he would have been considerably slower. The normal speech rate these days is 120-150 w/m. Therein



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# Where did all the time go?

One of the biggest challenges facing any person is how they spend their time. It is the one resource that is finite and you can never get back. With the level of distractions in our culture now reaching epic proportions, time management is becoming a major concern.

In fact, it's a crisis an increasing number of professionals now see as their biggest challenge. At the beginning of the last decade, email was still in its infancy and technology was going to change the world and our paradigms as we knew it.

Technology was seen as being the new vanguard. It would make our lives quicker, easier, more enjoyable and of course, infinitely more profitable. It hasn't quite worked out like that, has it?

While the internet has undoubtedly been one of humankind's most impressive inventions we, as human beings, have paid a high price when it comes to how we spend our time. With the explosion of the internet age, with email and social media part of our everyday fabric, the average person has become a slave to interruptions.

This is starting to have an impact on our attention spans and today's generation Y (currently under 25) now have 25%\* less ability to focus on tasks than the previous generation. You only have to look at conversations between young people on the London Underground to see that everyday conversation is now a



multi-tasked affair of broken conversation whilst messaging on a Smartphone. Unknowingly, a whole generation of 'message-alert' slaves are being created.

What this has really created is a culture whose communication quality is falling dramatically and with it, the landscape of how we spend our time is shifting too. Without doubt, email is now the preferred form of communication in business. It has surpassed the phone and now people spend far more time on email.

For the averagely busy person, it is nearly impossible to stay on top of the flow and most people are having to ring-fence time in their diaries to deal with getting on top of their inbox.

Now, more than ever, it is important to have firm boundaries in place to deal with the increasing demands on our time with ever increasing deadlines. So, what can you do?

Well, the first thing to do is to figure out how to prioritise. Probably the best and most simple tool for this comes from Stephen Covey's '7 habits of highly successful people' (see below).



Tim Farish

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1. Important/Urgent	2. Important/Not Urgent
3. Not Important/Urgent	4. Not Important/Not Urgent

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## Where did all the time go? ...continued

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Any task can be placed in one of the quadrants above. Quadrant 1 deals with urgent deadlines i.e NOW!, crises and illness. It really shouldn't deal with much more. It deals with anything that is 'mission critical' and should really only consist of tasks that have to be done now otherwise there will be severe consequences.

Quadrant 2 deals with strategy, relationships, problem-solving, planning, goal-setting and exercise (wellbeing). It is the Quadrant which allows us to have direction and feel in control. If we spend too much time in Quadrant 1 and not enough in Quadrant 2 then we are going to suffer as we will never get the mental space to move forward and out of fire-fighting mode. Time in Quadrant 1 is of course important but too much of it leads to becoming overwhelmed and eventually burn-out.

Quadrant 3 activity deals with anything that is requested of you by other people that isn't 'mission critical' but is important to respond quickly. 99% of all client emails fall into this category as well as verbal requests from colleagues and subordinates and especially bosses! I stress this as it is only natural to want to respond but to put every single request into Quadrant 1 without checking priority is only going to make things a lot harder for yourself.

The challenge with how most people prioritise is that they spend far too

much time immediately dealing with email requests and interruptions/offers from others (Quadrant 3 activity) and not enough time saying 'NO' or dealing with requests later while Quadrants 1 & 2 need to be dealt with.

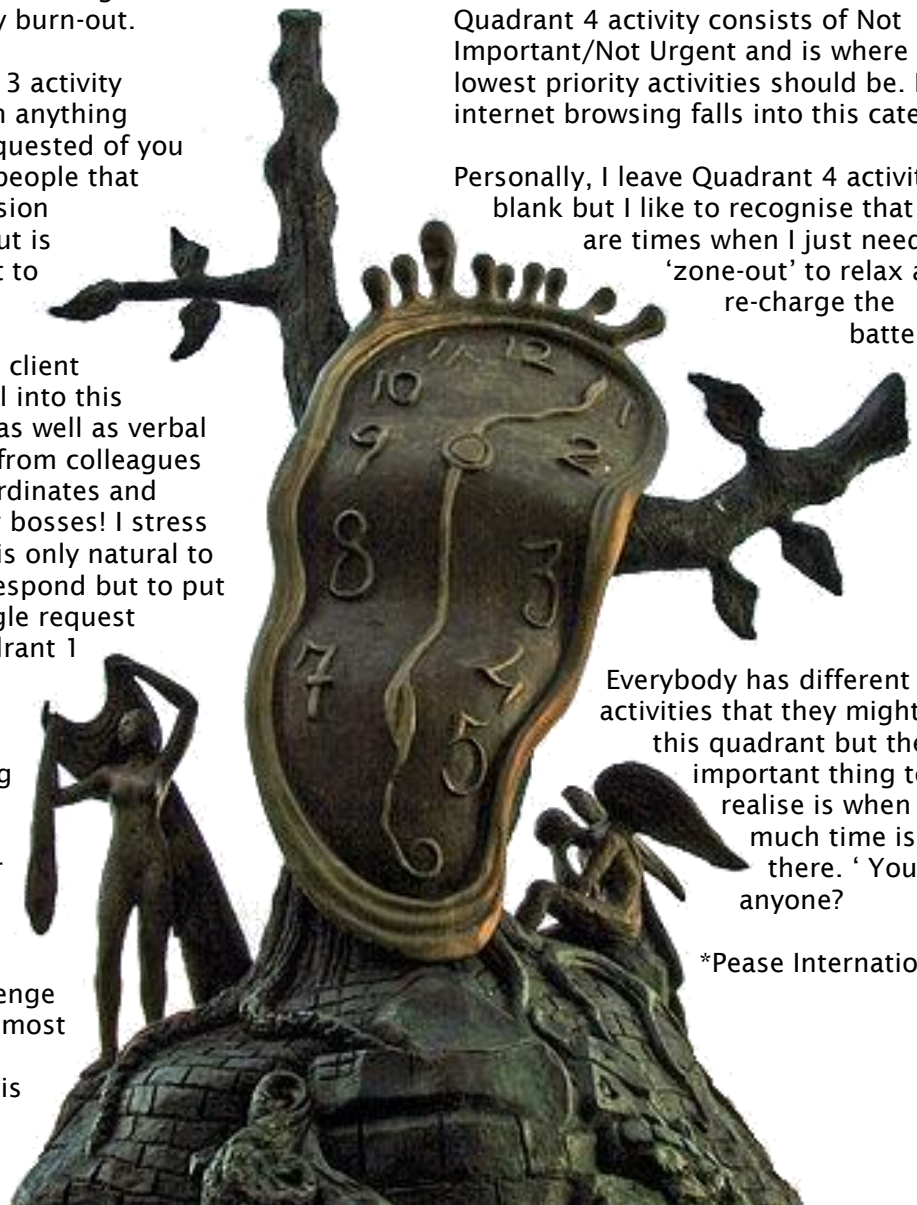
This is the real challenge that today's culture and technology have created in how we spend our time. They have blurred our boundaries between what is important and urgent and we have become more reactive in how we deal with requests. The expectation of response-times in communication has dramatically changed over the last decade and we are now suffering from an 'immediacy effect' where we believe we have to respond almost in real-time. And unless you have got firm boundaries in place then you are going to feel no more in control than Pavlov's dog.

Quadrant 4 activity consists of Not Important/Not Urgent and is where the lowest priority activities should be. Most internet browsing falls into this category!

Personally, I leave Quadrant 4 activities blank but I like to recognise that there are times when I just need to 'zone-out' to relax and re-charge the batteries.

Everybody has different activities that they might put in this quadrant but the important thing to realise is when too much time is spent there. 'You Tube' anyone?

\*Pease International



# Silence is also speech



I have so many television channels that I have lost count. Most of them I have never watched or wouldn't even care to watch, for that matter. I suppose the American adage "50 channels and nothing to watch" holds true. But there is a flicker of hope, because way down that never ending list of ITVs, CNBCs, MTVs and their + and 1 2 3 bolt ons, there is TV5.

TV5 is to the world of television what Marmite is to the palate. You love it or hate it. And yes, if you don't speak French, don't bother for it will only leave that bitter aftertaste closely associated with yeast extract on your non-French speaking tongue.

TV5 caters for the entire French speaking world outside France. Whether you're living in Montreal, Mauritius, or Morocco, Mauritania and you love the sound of "la langue de Moliere", you will tune in. I do.

My favourite show is le Journal Afrique, (Africa News) and here's why I'm a fan. I enjoy watching African leaders, presidents and prime ministers speak because I love their "Music" and their "Dance". They go up and down in pitch, they vary their pace, they pause for impact, they speak louder and go softer, they hold eye contact on key points. Their gesturing is varied, appears natural and is often refreshingly animated. This is the African oral tradition at work; a tradition which gives those who embrace it an incredible advantage in any speaking situation.

In Africa, oral tradition is the way that attitudes, beliefs and culture are communicated. It is intimately linked to the African way of life and explains why most Africans place great worth in it. For centuries, Africans have depended on oral tradition to inform, to teach and to persuade. It is designed to make sense of life on earth and the spiritual life hereafter.



Historically, most African societies didn't have an alphabet, so they couldn't keep

written records. Instead, information was passed on by word of mouth. To ensure accuracy, memorability and persuasiveness in messaging, people became reliant on good delivery skills, both vocal and non-verbal. Also learning words by rote is a necessary basis for *oral tradition*.



African societies are not alone in having an oral tradition. Indeed it can be found in most, cultures, and all monotheistic religions. Christianity, Judaism and Islam are all proud guardians.

I contend that in Western society the oral tradition has partially been lost as we have made ourselves increasingly dependent on written communication and so place greater trust in what we read than what we hear. Just ask the Romans, or one Roman rather, who maintained that "*Verba volant, scripta manent*", literally translated "*Spoken words fly away, written words remain*".

This quote is commonly attributed to Caius Titus of the Roman Senate, but apparently there is no conclusive evidence that he actually said it! Maybe someone forgot to write it down. Ironically, it is thought that he uttered these very words during a speech in The Senate, a forum in which rhetorical prowess and verbal agility drove and fuelled the political process.

Titus's argument is that spoken words can easily get forgotten whereas written documents are permanent and therefore more conclusive. Rest assured, what you have just read will be kept for posterity. Whether they care to read it or not is a different matter.

Only a fool would dispute the importance of literacy and the significance of the written word; it is one of the

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**Carl Schreiter**

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## Silence is also speech...continued

fundamental building blocks upon which humanity has developed and been allowed to flourish, but apparently at the expense of the spoken word, and our ability to tell stories.

how to pause before and after key statements, how to create impact through better eye contact and why a poker face is often the surest of way to undermine your own credibility.

So what can we glean from the African way of speaking?

Oral tradition relies on the human voice to communicate messages. Just listen to Thomas Sankara, Africa's own Che Guevara. In 1984, he appeared at a press conference in Paris as the elected president of Burkina Faso. Sankara makes full use of all vocal parameters and in particular pitch modulation, pace and volume.

Listen to the music for this is vocal control and projection of the highest order, even to the non-French speaking ear. Not to mention his eye contact and pausing after key points, which as you know is nothing more than a simple but powerful non-verbal delivery technique. See for yourself: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWN-qQJbBOs&feature=related>



Hiding comfortably behind his shades, in this speech Robert Mugabe asserts his role as president and the protector of Zimbabwe. Like Sankara, he is a revolutionary of sorts and takes to the podium with seemingly great ease, urging the crowd to join him in the never ending struggle against the enemy, the British. Over to you Robert: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWlY4blakw&feature=related>.

Not bad for an 84 year old and as they say sometimes less is more. Conversely too much of one thing is rarely a good thing. In stark contrast see Ian Paisley passionately propagating partisan politics from the podium, through volume and volume alone. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zSWIAHD29M>.

I would be very surprised and profoundly disappointed to discover that Protestant oratory art professed screaming as its preferred means of vocal expression.

Finally, I would like to introduce you to Gabon's president Ali Bongo Ondimba. In this infomercial, he urges the Gabonese educated elite living abroad to return to the land and help rebuild it. He



skilfully combines the art of reading from a teleprompter with seemingly effortless vocal variation and gestures that could best be described as natural and refreshingly unpretentious. This of course is in French, but you don't have to understand the words, just enjoy the "Music" and the "Dance". And should this performance be to your liking, I strongly urge you to check out Ali the rapper. That's right this president got rhythm and a Sorbonne education to boot. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ner5l69Tr\\_s&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ner5l69Tr_s&feature=related)

Sources include: 'Silence is also speech' a West African proverb and John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 75)

Our African journey along the paths of oratory wisdom ends here. May it not be our last? I would willingly go back any time...

### Our Services

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We coach and advise individuals to perform at their best in the toughest situations including: Presentations, New Business Pitches, Business Development, Negotiating, Media Interviews, Telephone Calls and Document Writing.

We also produce scientific voice and visual analysis reports, then provide voice coaching and non-verbal communications advice.

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