



Ewan Pearson

Responding is better than answering

A broader look at what to do with any tough question

One of the more frequent topics that we have covered in coaching clients these past few months has been ‘answering the question’ or ATQ as it is so well known.

Usually this centres around the toughest questions that a client might get from one of their audiences such as shareholders, clients, customers, suppliers, or regulators. We have also covered media journalists and interviewers (for jobs).

We’ve had many such coaching sessions recently, and we have usually started by ditching ‘ATQ’ in favour of ‘ATQF’, which stands for ‘Answer The Question First’, which is also a key coaching point, because responders just don’t start with the answer, when they should.

ATQF is then subsumed by a larger acronym, ‘RTTQ’, which means ‘Respond To The Question’, as that is what you have to do: most of the time you answer, sometimes though you should block rather than answer, and at other times you won’t know the answer, so you can’t answer it.

We have written many times about the importance of pausing in spoken communication. We call one of them the ‘Thinking Pause’, to be done before speaking each point (chunk of words) that you want to deliver. In a question context this pause takes on a more important role, as it may be the only time you get to think about what to say next. You don’t want to live to regret what you say (although many have...).

This pause also pays the biggest compliment that you can pay to the

questioner – that you are going to give them a considered response rather than a quick fire one. It beats by miles the phrase *‘that’s a good question’* (which we hate, as it is often insincere, is usually just buying time, and is not said for all questions which implies the others were not as good). If someone says that to me, I reply: “Yes, *I know, that’s why I asked it!*”.

In many cases you won’t have had a chance to consider the question beforehand, despite our (and your) best endeavours to predict it. The *‘(Cripes), I wasn’t expecting that one’* question catches people out all the time, even if often it’s not that tough.

Even if you do predict it (clever you) and perhaps even practice a response (sensible you), you still need to figure out your exact response (skilful you), and all that is better done before you start the response than at any time later. If you do the thinking post hoc, you may well commit what we call a ‘Hagrid response’, named after that great Harry Potter character who often said after revealing a secret: *‘oh ‘arry, I probably shouldn’t ‘ave told you thaaat’* in his broad Gloucestershire/West Country accent.

So, what do we think you should think about in this pause?

First, we assume you listened deeply, actively and all the way to the end of the statement/question (people generally don’t).

The next thing is to work out if you need to *correct* the question, or *clarify* something. If either of these, do them now but circle back to listening.

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In this edition:

Responding is better than answering

By Ewan Pearson

A broader look at what to do with any tough question

‘Witless Silence’ or Agent Provocateur?

By Des Harney

Some helpful communication lessons from recent, high profile police investigations

What Daniel said

By GPB Team

We connect Systematic biases, and Prof. Daniel Kahneman’s work on Systems 1 & 2, to acts of persuasion

Additional resources

At the back of each Journal we summarise where we have placed videos and reading materials on websites and social media to help you in optimising your self-development.

Responding is better than answering (cont.)

Or you can *paraphrase* (save this for long-winded but clear questions). Once that's all sorted out, we think you should consider the metaphorical Trident sticking up in the road ahead:

There are 3 options to choose from:

1. Know the answer, happy to share it,
2. Know the answer but don't want to share it (e.g. confidential or would create a negative vibe) or
3. You don't know the answer so you can't share it.

If you're lucky, that will take you less than a second of your Thinking Pause. But what you think about next depends on which fork you go down. Here are a few ideas about each:

Know the answer, happy to share

This is the ATQF option. You may need to take a lot of time to think about your optimal response, and if so there's no harm in paying a compliment to the questioner by asking for a moment to consider it; at least that's genuine.

Start with a pithy, simple, clear over-arching answer. That could even be 'yes', or a short fact such as '8.8 million' (the population of Greater London from the 2021 Census).

Then elaborate with enough detail only to complete your answer clearly, then find a place to STOP (people generally don't).

Then Bridge to a point of your own if possible (again people generally don't).

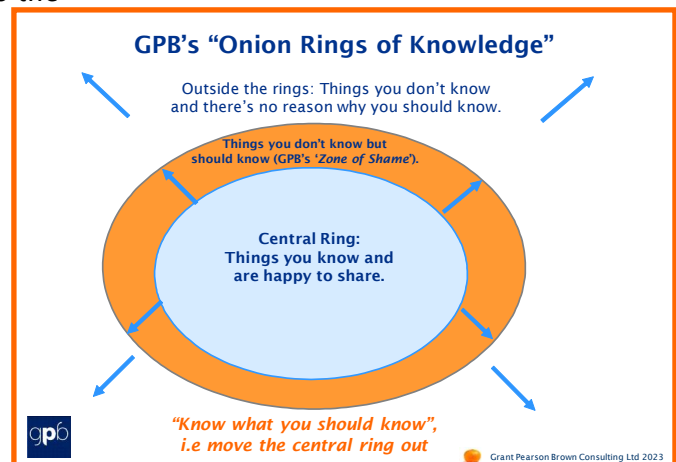
Then repeat for each question you get. A good analogy is the queue of aeroplanes trying to land at a busy airport such as Heathrow. If you spend a long time on one answer, you're keeping all the subsequent planes (questions) waiting, and the planes then have to circle or even divert to another airport (the question is not asked).

Know the answer, don't want to share

We don't like 'no comment' as it is (a) abrupt/rude, and (b) does not explain why you haven't answered. Instead say that you can't answer, with a reason that passes the 'Reasonableness Test'. Confidentiality and Inappropriateness are two such passes. But we'd also like you to be helpful, so we like the 'can't say – can say' pairing. Tell us what you can as a consolation prize. Then try again to bridge to a point of your own.

Don't know the answer

No-one knows the answer to every question, and if well outside your area of knowledge, a shrug of the shoulders and '*I don't know*' is the right place to start. At least you get credit for being honest. But you should know what you should know, and where you don't, you're in what we call the '*Zone of Shame*' (use a deep operatic basso voice for effect, if you wish).



These are tricky; there is loss of face, embarrassment and a big risk that you will guess. Don't! That is very dangerous especially if you also convey a sense of surety that is unfounded. Instead of guessing, say you don't know (be honest), but offer a consolation answer if you have one.

This is what we call a 'don't know – do know' pairing. Then try again to bridge to a point of your own.

There, a few simple tips for RTTQ. Any questions?

By Ewan Pearson

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‘Witless Silence’ or Agent Provocateur?

Some helpful communication lessons from recent, high profile police investigations:

1. Be very conscious of the importance of **Trust** in spoken communication, and ensure you maintain it.
2. When in Crisis Mode, don't go silent and create a vacuum, even if it's uncomfortable to speak.
3. Learn from your own - and from others' - mistakes.
4. Your Spoken Communications need to be very clear.
5. Social Media is now your judge and jury.

Police forces around the world have come under increasingly critical, public scrutiny. Cases such as George Floyd (USA), Sarah Everard and Nicola Bulley (UK), and P. Jeyaraj & J. Beniks (India) have helped create difficult operating environments for the Police in those nations.

In this context, police forces must aim for what is a difficult communication balance: What is truly in the public interest to share, and what merely interests the public?

There's a demanding dynamic between the need for secrecy/privacy, e.g. for the victims, their friends and families, vs. the sometimes conflicting need to engage with the public to elicit vital information, often from unwitting or reluctant witnesses, and often sought via the media in order to reach the widest audience most quickly.

Regardless of the many practical difficulties surrounding police incidents, *effective and persuasive communication* often remains paramount, just as it does in business and elsewhere.

The media do help the police, as this also meets their voracious ongoing need to fill 24/7 news feeds - but only up to a point, as the media also have their own agendas, e.g. to secure (rare) "scoops", a unique angle or headline, or better still a controversy.

You might therefore expect *effective and persuasive communication* to be an area of significant focus and investment for key police officers. But such high profile cases are thankfully rare, so few investigators get to become sufficiently well-practiced. Alas, they typically find this out the hard way...

Few would reasonably expect the very early stages of police investigations to show significant progress. Yet progress (or its absence) is precisely what the public want: *What are the police doing? Is it enough? What aspects of a case are they staying tight-lipped about? Have they missed key clues? I bet I could do a better job, and so on.*



"Let me through – I'm an armchair detective"

Image source: roystoncartoons.com, www.private-eye.co.uk (approval given for GPB's reproduction)

Where has this hyper-critical trait come from? I doubt anyone really knows, but there's a clue from our obsession with crime fiction. Agatha Christie is the world's most-translated author and the world's favourite fiction writer of all time, with over 2 billion copies sold. Yet she's just one author in a densely crowded segment. The detective series 'Beyond Paradise', 'Death In Paradise', and 'Endeavour' all figure amongst the top 6 UK TV shows. Each is more widely watched than even the most popular soap operas¹.

Interest in "Cold Case" and Forensics TV dramas has also developed (in the UK,



Desmond Harney

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'Witless Silence' or Agent Provocateur? (cont.)

for instance, 'New Tricks' and 'Silent Witness', Scandi Noir dramas such as The Killing and The Bridge, and from the USA, Bones and CSI [name your City]).

Silent Witness (expertly parodied as 'Witless Silence'²) is broadcast in more than 235 territories and has survived for 26 series and 228 episodes. That's quite a coup given its claustrophobic and repetitive dramatic setting.

The successful and relatively low-cost US show 'Making a Murderer' (20 episodes, 2015-'18) has spawned many imitators, investigating true-life miscarriages of justice. Particularly during the Covid lockdown era of box-set bingeing.

There is clearly a sceptic / detective / pathologist in many of us! They are a professional investigator's nightmare, creating a communication minefield demanding careful navigation.

I'll use the recent UK police investigation of Nicola Bulley as a case to examine. The police communication related to it was described by one headline as a 'Car crash'³.



The River Wyre, near the site where Nicola Bulley's dog and phone were found¹⁰.

I'll omit most case details, since extensive coverage is easily found elsewhere. What can we learn here to apply beyond the world of criminal investigation?

First there is the benefit of specialist Crisis Management coaching and practice, already mentioned above.

Oddly, I first heard of this case through Social Media, via a direct Missing Person appeal from a concerned friend, on LinkedIn.

Next, it's vital for figures of authority to understand better how to be persuasive, and for these Police cases in particular, how to (re-)build trust.

Persuasion leans heavily on Ethos, Pathos and Logos (see image below), first identified by Aristotle c. 2,400 years ago. They can be roughly translated as Trust, Emotion and Logic.

The Rhetorical Triangle

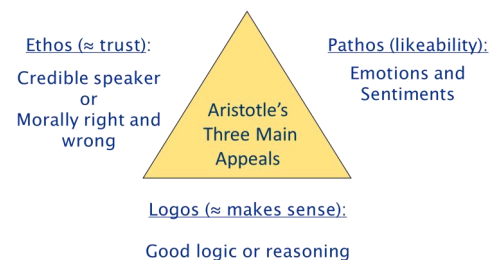


Image source: GPB

Trust Enablers include showing *honesty* and *openness*. Most of us instinctively recognise and emphasise them ourselves. This pays dividends because if we trust someone we are more likely to consider then accept their logical case. Without trust, the other Appeals tend to fail.

Much scientific research^{11, 12} supports the idea that establishing trust is a prerequisite for effective persuasion, while withholding information (even out of perceived necessity) creates a barrier. So be open and honest with an audience. Otherwise, they'll likely recognise you're being "*economical with the truth*", with negative consequences for effective persuasion. This was an obstacle for the Police in these cases.

In the Nicola Bulley case, early Police statements were strong on appealing to Pathos (concern about a missing woman) and to Ethos (what is morally right i.e. helping to find her). This set off the desperation for news updates. They were less strong on being open

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'Witless Silence' or Agent Provocateur? (cont.)

and honest – on sharing what they knew about the potential cause of her disappearance. When the police shared their early “*working hypothesis*” that Nicola had entered the river at her last known location, it caused widespread disbelief. Why?

Well, important facts were initially withheld: the police had had recent contact with Nicola and considered her “*vulnerable*” and a “*high risk*”. We only learned later that they had “*looked at and discounted every potential suspicious or criminal*” angle in her disappearance⁴. Unlike the public, they sought witnesses, not suspects...

The Economist later summarised this in their ‘Social Media Sherlocks’ article: from early on, “*Lancashire constabulary had a good idea about what happened to her, even if they weren’t telling us. The implicit message was: trust us. But the public simply couldn’t... confidence in police, especially when dealing with women, is at a low*”⁵.

The information vacuum quickly led to an army of ‘keyboard warriors’ pronouncing multiple unfounded crackpot theories about Nicola’s associates, location and fate, fed by a diet of detective fiction, which routinely normalises the wildly implausible. Consequences included a rapid escalation of the wrong sort of public interest, voyeurs speculatively descending on the scene, false information and abuse.

This all made the Police’s task more difficult and resource-hungry. Det Supt Becky Smith said she’d “*never seen anything like it*”⁶ meaning the levels of social media coverage of this case, in her three decade career.

The public interest became a social and main media story, acquiring a virtual life of its own. Once this destructive social media “genie” was out of its bottle, the Police then retreated, seemingly unsure about their best next steps.

Into this silent vacuum, The Guardian stated, “*diver Peter Faulding arrived*”⁶. He was incorrectly championed by the media as an expert witness with inside knowledge. The same article later expanded, without irony or self-reflection, he “*gave updates multiple times a day to the eager press... and Lancashire constabulary struggled desperately to keep control of the narrative*”⁶. The Police had not hired him in the investigation. Should journalists not have clarified their source’s status?

During such crises, there’s a huge hunger for information updates, so it’s important to update proactively. Remember the daily Covid updates, anyone? Otherwise, “*alternative facts*” unhelpfully fill the void, prompting further speculation that quickly spirals out of control.

Only six hours after withholding Ms Bulley’s vulnerabilities as being “*personal and private*”, the Police performed a massive U-turn, revealing that she had “*significant issues with alcohol*” arising from “*ongoing struggles with the menopause*”³.

Much criticism then focused on Police motives for having violated the victim’s privacy: “*purely to discredit her as a rational actor and re-situate her disappearance away from the realm of mystery, back in the realm of the expected. It... reinforced the sense of institutional misogyny within policing as a whole*”⁷. The Police thus further eroded public trust, leaving a Rhetorical Triangle in tatters.

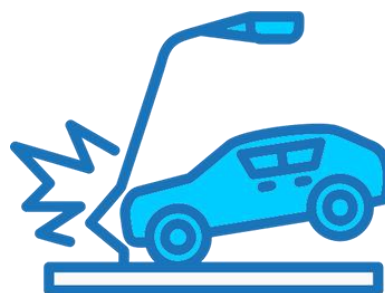


Image credit: manshagraphics

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'Witless Silence' or Agent Provocateur? (cont.)

The Independent newspaper captured it neatly: *'If the public cannot trust how the police handle the release of information, why on earth should they trust their investigations?'⁸*.

Ouch... So what can we all learn from this tragic case?

I guess we have to start bluntly with this: if YOUR audience doesn't believe you're being honest with them, why on Earth would they trust you? So focus on building credibility and trust first.

How we communicate verbally and vocally informs the way we're perceived, and that means we should all focus on what you look like and what you sound like, not just what you say. They must all align (we use the word 'congruence for that).

The Police's communication errors should be a salutary reminder for us all of the fundamental need to establish and maintain – and retain – trust.

When we're required to persuade others, we ought to avoid the mistakes made in *'the biggest communications disaster ever cobbled together by a British police service'⁸*.

Don't you just hate it when all your good work is overlooked or unappreciated? Bad communication largely obscured the finding that the Police's initial working theory in this case, the logic (Logos) part, was correct all along. Despite that, it was not the Police who found Nicola's body, but a member of the public. Two weeks after she entered the water and less than a mile downstream.

The Lancashire Police will now come under close scrutiny from the College of Policing, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) and others. These are further huge distractions and resource costs which could have been avoided, with more focus on Communication basics.

Andrew Snowdon, Lancashire's Police and Crime Commissioner agreed:

"there remain questions about... how it was communicated... lessons can be learned"⁹.

We would ALL do well to learn from those lessons.

By Des Harney

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What Daniel said...

"...my mother was right: people are endlessly complicated and interesting." Daniel Kahneman

We're inspired to write this because it's important to bear in mind that your audiences will be biased in some way. So will you. Thus we want to share here some of the main types of bias and developments you can make.

Drs. Daniel Kahneman (K) and Amos Tversky (T) are mostly famous for their **Prospect Theory**, which won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2002. The biggest surprise was that neither of them were economists; they were psychologists. Their theory describes how people make decisions, especially when facing risk and in particular financial risk. It turns out (a) that being rational and logical isn't really how it's done, although we'd like to think it is, and (b) there are two 'Systems' in our brains that share the decision-making.

Most people refer now to this field as 'Behavioural **Economics**' to take account of how we actually make decisions, rather than how we say we do. In finance and investment, this field has explained many of the mistakes humans have made, and continue to make.

We are also interested in how people make decisions, or as we would say, acts of persuasion. So with deep gratitude, here we share some of that theory.

Every day people typically make between 2 and 10 thousand decisions, big and small. That's about one per breath. Behind them is a battle in their minds, pitting **intuition** against **logic**. This conflict affects every aspect of our lives and leads to mistakes - from what we eat to what we believe, and especially to how we spend our money.

K & T worked out that the intuitive part of a mind is a lot more powerful than we may realise.: *"You have an opinion immediately, whether you like it, or not. Later, when you're asked for reasons, you'll invent reasons... rationalisations that are not necessarily the real reasons."* (K). Your audience will form

that opinion of you too. The BBC produced a documentary about this, available from our [YouTube channel](#)¹ (and elsewhere).

Here are some of the flaws they mention; whether you are a persuader or persuadee:

Cognitive Biases

There are several types. They are not mistakes, but systematic errors that are predictable. More than 150 cognitive biases have been identified. *"There are lots of ways to get things wrong and one way to get things right. We are capable of many of them."* Professor Dan Ariely, Duke University.

One example is the **Halo effect**, where if we like one thing or a person, we like many other related things. Ditto for dislikes. *"People really are uncomfortable by the idea that Hitler loved children. He did... we feel uncomfortable to see an attractive trait in a person that we consider the epitome of evil"* (DK)

Inattention Blindness: *"We glide through the world, blissfully unaware of most of what we do, and of how little we know our minds"* - a BBC narrator.¹

A US police officer, whilst chasing a suspect, supposedly ran past some colleagues beating up a member of the public. He claimed not to have noticed them, and was convicted by a jury that didn't believe him. Later scientific experiments showed that nearly half of participants doing a similar action didn't see a fight happening right beside them. When we are focussed on a detailed task ahead of us, we don't see what's beside us (both literally and metaphorically).

Development: look around more (literally and metaphorically).

Confirmation bias: the tendency to interpret new information as confirmation of existing ideas, e.g. pinning the blame on 'The Usual Suspects'. We tend to attach more credence to supportive - and less to

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What Daniel said...(cont.)

contradictory - information.

Development: Be critical of thoughts that seem to confirm, be clear what is hypothesis and fact.

Present bias: We focus on the 'now' rather than thinking ahead. This helps to explain over-eating and smoking. We tend to attach more credence to supportive - and less to contradictory - information.

Development: look forwards and backwards more (literally and metaphorically).

Priming bias: If we are primed (e.g. with a low or high number), we will use that number as a reference for the next decision we will take. Negotiators take note! In an experiment, buyers paid more for champagne when they had discussed higher numbers in a game, less where lower numbers were discussed.

Development: try to ignore irrelevant prior references.

The IKEA effect is the attachment to things we have created, and attach less value to things we've not created. This can lead to internal ideas of products being considered superior, when really an external one is better.

Development: Try to balance your views rationally, on purely objective bases.

Risk aversion bias: Our appetite for risk is very different between outcomes when we may lose money vs when we might win, even when the odds are the same. We're more cautious (risk averse) when we have an opportunity to win, and are willing to take greater risks when faced with making a loss.

Development: Calculate risk mathematically, instead of guessing; invert the argument to see what your appetite would be the other way round.

Spotlight effect is when we think others are evaluating you when in fact they aren't. This can increase our nerves and stress as speakers, even to the level of Glossophobia - the fear of Public Speaking.

Development: look around to see if that's what they're doing; consider what you're doing when in an audience;

practice the presentation/pitch/speech until you can say 'I know I can deliver this well'. Build virtuous feedback circles by celebrating when it goes well.

Information bias: There are various types of this bias, such as Recall, Research, Observer, Performance and Regression-to-mean bias. In general it's a bias that seeks or uses information that does not affect, or is irrelevant to, action. Sometimes that additional information can be expensive, take time, or both, but would not change the decision.

Development: get comfortable using the 80/20 rule, i.e. enough information is better than all information. Ask yourself if you have enough information to make a decision, and whether more information would change the decision.

Overconfidence bias: Some 70% of car drivers in the UK believe they are 'above average'. We overestimate our own abilities, we are biased towards our own performance over others', and we are over-precise in measuring our own abilities. "Yes I'm sure" is wrong 20% of the time².

Development: instead of relying on subjective opinion, look for rational, external and objective assessments and measurements.

Loss aversion bias: The tendency to think that a loss is more severe than an equivalent gain.

From the BBC documentary¹: New York cab drivers' work patterns seem illogical. They don't do extra hours on rainy days, when income would be the greatest; instead they set a target daily income, and when they have that, they go home, which is earlier on rainy days. They don't seek to maximise annual income and instead see below daily target as a loss and above it as a gain, i.e. they are risk averse in being more interested in avoiding losses than making gains.

Development: Being aware of your loss aversion bias is a good start. Then aim to measure the probabilities instead of using intuition based on this bias.

There is an evolutionary basis of our biases - Rhesus monkey research

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What Daniel said...(cont.)

showed that they frame their decisions in the exact same way we do, suggesting it's a bias etched into our DNA¹. (Prof. Laurie Santos, Yale Univ.)

Systems 1 and 2

To get through every day, we use two thinking 'Systems'. Fast (System 1) is automatic, instinctive, and emotional. It relies on mental shortcuts that generate intuitive answers to problems as they arise. Most people call fast decisions 'subconscious habits', such as walking, eating and driving (note they are not *unconscious*). System 2, is slow, logical, and deliberate⁴.

We tend to believe our first decision was sensible and correct, and build later decisions on the preceding ones. You can see why we can go well off course! Thankfully, System 1 IS right MOST of the time, e.g. what's 2x2? 4. It's "an automatic, effortless mode we're in most of the time... it's almost like a reflex" (K).

Sometimes System 2 will be used deliberately. It's slow, logical and rational: "the voice in your head" and "It's slow, limited and lazy" (BBC narrator¹). "It's the minor character who thinks he is the star" (K).

Examples of System 2 include: what's 22 x 17? and... Try counting back from 100 in 7s whilst running fast. "That involves work, it involves effort, it involves concentration. There will be physiological symptoms" (K¹) such as increased heart rate, and production of stress hormones.

Sadly, System 2 is often used to backfill decisions taken under System 1 with logical reasons; sometimes these are invented to suit, i.e. not the truth.

Kahneman describes a question that requires thought (System 2). Instead we consult System 1 for a similar but easier question and often will answer that one, sometimes without even noticing that we didn't answer the question asked!

The presence of many cognitive biases seem to have been a significant factor

in the scale of the global financial crisis of 2008 – "in a part of the economy where serious mistakes could be made – and were!" (Shefrin, on Wall Street and global financial structures)

"If the regulators had listened to Behavioural Economists early on, we would have designed a very different financial system, and we wouldn't have had the incredible increase in the housing market and we wouldn't have had this financial catastrophe"
Professor Dan Ariely.

"We have a deliberative system. We can reflect on our biases... System 2 has realised, for the first time, that there IS a System 1... We can allow ourselves to make better decisions. This is the first time in evolution this has happened" - Prof. Laurie Santos. "If we think we have reasons for what we believe, that is often a mistake¹." (K)

People often make poor decisions just because of the way the human brain is wired - because of cognitive biases. This helps explain why people underestimate how long it will take to finish projects, are overconfident about their ability to implement strategies, why they don't choose the optimal health or retirement benefits.

By the GPB Team

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Additional Client Resources



GPB Website (gpb.eu)

Our website has all previous issues of our 'Speak Up' Journal, containing plenty of great articles with useful advice. There are other interesting items including our dictionary of acronyms, a list of many Rhetorical Tools, and a list of neologisms (new words). These are regularly updated. Please get in touch if you have suitable words that we can add! Please visit www.gpb.eu, then look under 'Journals and posts' on the top tab.

YouTube

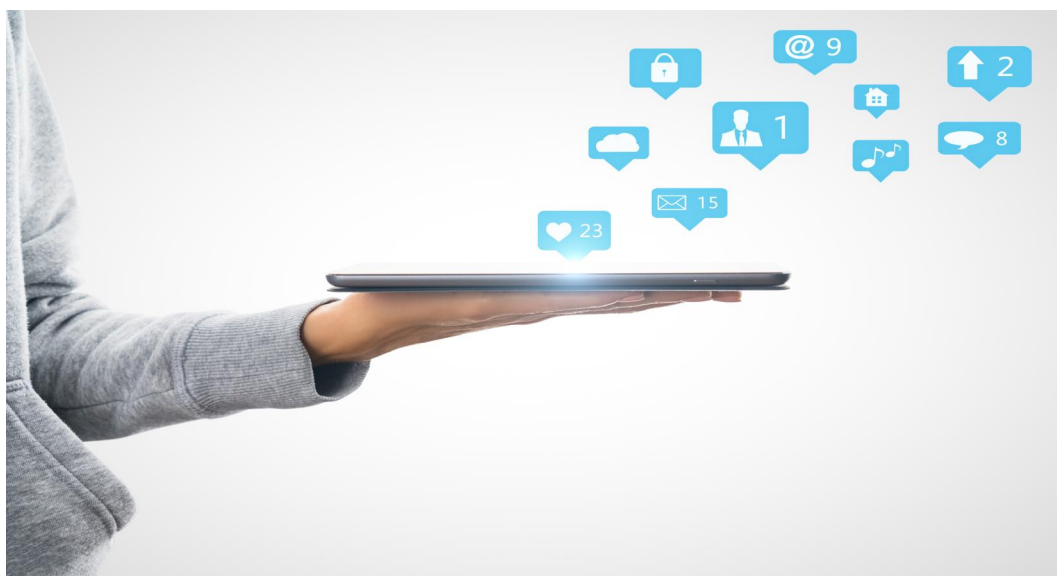
At GPB we like to provide helpful and entertaining playlists of videos about presentations, pitches, negotiations, giving speeches, and a lot more! Since our Spring 2022 Journal we have for example added to our channel:

- How to Catch a Liar (Assuming we Want to) by Dr. Paul Ekman
- Sir David Attenborough delivery of 'The People's Seat' address at COP24
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LinkedIn

GPB's LinkedIn page is also regularly updated with posts and content from topical areas of interest. Again, we value any comments or thoughts and encourage healthy debate. Please visit and like our page, and contribute your views at www.linkedin.com/company/grant-pearson-brown-consulting-ltd/.



Find useful content at our website, on YouTube, and on LinkedIn! *Image source: Adobe Stock*

Our Services

Grant Pearson Brown Consulting Ltd is a respected adviser based in London. We enhance the performance of businesses, helping clients to excel in the use of the spoken and written word, improving the performance of individuals and teams. Over the long term our work improves the way a firm does business.

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, visual and content analysis reports, which are unique to GPB. We then provide voice and visual coaching, and content advice.

Our clients' needs are the only focus of our work; we listen to them and closely tailor our response to deliver first class coaching and advice. In support of this we selectively pursue new ideas and approaches, continually hone our advice and create tools such as:

- Voice, Visual and Content Analyses,
- Prospect Relationship Management (PRM),
- the Information Iceberg,
- Client s' Rights Act,
- Feature, Benefit Impact (FBI),
- Buyers' Criteria Analysis, (BCA), and
- Our Q&A Methodology.

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts

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