

# CREATING CONFIDENT BUSINESS COMMUNICATORS

*Speaking to large or small groups often makes business professionals nervous. Compound the fear of presenting with the possibility that the group being addressed could hold the answer to future contracts, and the nervous executive is now in panic mode. Professional Speech Services of Alabama addresses these concerns, while bolstering confidence within the professional.*

BY RUSSELL RICHEY

**D**eborah Boswell, CEO of Professional Speech Services of Alabama, is in the business of creating personal confidence. A speech pathologist who began her career providing therapy to children, Boswell has extended her 13-year-old company's reach into the corporate world by offering communication-skills improvement consulting and training, services increasingly in demand among many of Alabama's preeminent corporations.

Recently nominated for the 2006 Small Business Award by the Greater Birmingham Area Chamber of Commerce, Boswell also has produced a DVD for Auburn University's Business and Engineering Continuing Education program that helps technical professionals hone their communications and presentation skills.

*Business Alabama* recently spent some time with Boswell, who gave us her perspective on the growing use of corporate speech pathology by business and industry, as well as some excellent suggestions that can help improve anyone's presentation skills.

**You began your career in a differ-**

**ent area of speech pathology, working mostly with children. How did you come to develop a focus on helping companies and businesses?**

In 1998, I had started exploring the area of foreign accent modification. It's a big area right now across the board, not only with speech pathologists. So I had seen several clients working on foreign accents, and then I had a request from a gentleman who wondered if I could work with a foreign accent, could I also work with a his Southern accent? He had been in a situation where an executive in his company basically put him down in front of a lot of people and said to lose his Southern drawl and make it quick. So we began a seven-week course, and I realized how much I loved the work, and I loved seeing him blossom and build confidence in his own communication skills. This gentlemen helped me see there was a market for these services — something beyond Toastmasters, and really not working with the disordered community, but working with people who wanted to become better communicators.

**Within the companies you serve, generally who is identified as in need of your help?**

Many times it is supervisors or managers. Occasionally, I am called to work with a front-line person — the receptionist, because that person has such an impact on the first impression that someone has with a company. I also have worked with several CEOs, several executive level individuals. I think many times they are not as willing to recognize they have a problem and others don't share that with them.

**Where is your industry in terms of its rate of growth, and its overall lifecycle position?**



Deborah Boswell

I would say that our industry is growing wildly. In traditional speech pathology, we are starting to see an aging population, so more and more speech therapists are working with elderly. There is a lot of speech therapy right after strokes that can help people regenerate speech.

As far as the corporate side, I really do feel that area is growing, as well. For so long, you thought of corporate communication training being something you do in-house. There really wasn't anyone who could specialize in the actual voicing — the articulation, the diction of what you say and the grammar, but also to take it from the viewpoint of how good are you at presenting and how we could give you some coaching. That's what corporate speech pathology is all about.

**Are you generally responding to a tactical situation, or are you working with companies to take comprehensive "big picture" looks at the quality of their employee's interpersonal business communications skills?**

When I started out, it was more a tactical situation as it came up. But with several companies, we've

expanded our reach because they are getting to be more focused on the professional image the company has. There are a few companies, not all of them, but a few, that are forward thinking and looking at more of a comprehensive approach.

### How do you measure outcomes in your work?

Let's just say we're working on someone's presentation skills. We'll do a baseline video at the very first session and then at the very end, by the sixth session or if we are doing a two-day workshop, by the end of the second day, they'll give another presentation and then we look at the two and compare. Now if it's working on an accent, whether it's regional, a regional dialect or a foreign accent, we do baseline testing to look at their grammatical features. We also do a pronunciation evaluation and then get objective scores. And after the sessions are finished and training is complete, we take a different test and you compare and measure the outcomes.

### Tell us about the DVD training video you developed for Auburn University's Business and Engineering Continuing Education.

Many people in the technical fields are very smart and intelligent, but often they lack communication skills when speaking to non-technical audiences. And so this DVD [teaches] technical professionals how to get the information to their audience in a simple manner without being condescending. The other thing is how to make a presentation more interesting. It's more that just regurgitating facts and figures. People want an emotional connection, and that's what this is all about.

### What would be some quick tips for professionals when it comes to making a presentation?

Right away one of the first things I would say is to use stories. Storytelling is huge right now. Look at the way people are marketing — they are telling stories. Blue Cross/

Blue Shield — constantly you are seeing stories of someone who has actually been through a trauma.

### Like testimonials?

Exactly, but not only testimonials, but also stories from your own life. And always the stories must make a point. They are not told for entertainment value. The speaker or the creator of the presentation has to figure out how an interesting story might reflect a concept they are trying to teach or a fact or a truth. The other thing is to get out from behind the podium. Move around and build rapport with your audience with authentic eye contact. You can't do that behind a podium — it becomes a barrier. •

*A regular contributor to Business Alabama, Russell Richey is a principal at Wilhite-Richey, a Birmingham-based marketing research and consulting firm. He can be reached at [russell@wilhite-richey.com](mailto:russell@wilhite-richey.com). To read more articles written by Richey, please visit at [www.wilhite-richey.com/articles.htm](http://www.wilhite-richey.com/articles.htm).*

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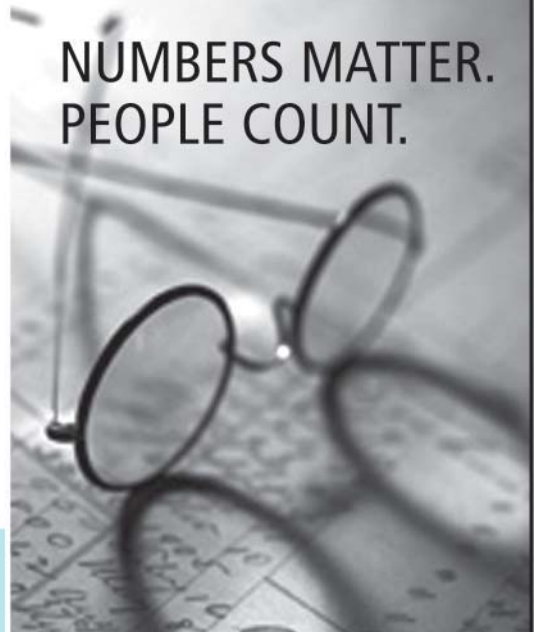
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