

394. Drew Kerr

Will Bachman 00:01

Hello, and welcome to Unleashed the show that explores how to thrive as an independent professional. I'm your host Will Bachman and I'm here today with Drew Kerr, who runs four corners communications, Drew, welcome to the show.

Drew Kerr 00:16

Hey, Will Good to see you here, you.

Will Bachman 00:18

So Drew, you have published a post that I really liked, I thought we could go through it about five rules for great communications. Talk to me about those five rules, let's walk through them.

Drew Kerr 00:31

Sure, let's get right to it. So these are five rules, that I feel that if for any really good communication, whether it be on zoom, or written presentation or speaking to people, and you want them to be effective, they're applicable for everybody, not just consultants, but anybody who needs to just be more effective and get people I believe on your side, and you know, to be more believable. So let's get right to the first of them. And the first of them is, know your audience. And a lot of people and I, a lot of these examples. And a lot of these things I talk about these five are things that I've seen with my own clients at four corners. And I'm gonna refer to your your friend, David A. Fields, because he's, he's a little beacon of light for me as he is for you. You know, he calls it right side up thinking, right? You talk about that also, right? It's not about you, it's about them. So knowing your audience is understanding that your audience has expectations about what they want to receive from you. And it's not about necessarily what you want to give them, but what they want to hear from you, and in what form. And those things are really important. You know, I used to have a, had a client for that I worked with for a very long time, they were a consumer research firm, and they were always writing things up in very wonky language. And you know, where I would write things, and they would add a lot of wonky language. And these are things that would be posted on their website and go out to a lot of reporters. But a lot of reporters are not necessarily winks. And, you know, I think one of the, you know, one of the, you know, sort of spin off corollaries that I tell people about knowing their audience is, you know, your audience doesn't necessarily work for you. They're not your employees, don't assume they know what you're talking about, you know, if you speak with internal jargon, and if, you know, if people need a glossary to understand what you're speaking of that, it's going to go right over their heads. You know, to me, it's a speed bump. And a lot of people make that mistake a lot of executives and communications professionals, they issue things and they assume that everybody who reads them is going to understand exactly what they're talking about, as if they're speaking to their own employees, but that's just not the case. So, you know, good messages should be conveyed in a clear language that your audience understands what have they come to hear with, you know, use references that they know, using words and languages and images, you know, that they are familiar with what they could identify

with, in a tone that would motivate them. So this is, you know, this is number one, you know, I think it's important to put yourself in the shoes of who's gonna listen to this, who's gonna read this? And will they understand it?

Will Bachman 03:48

Okay, what's Rule number two?

Drew Kerr 03:52

Rule number two, is, and this is one of my favorites, which is the most quotable people always get quoted. And I, I, I explain that to a lot of a lot of people. They want to know, you know, they want to get more attention, they want to be more memorable. When people are speaking on zoom, let's say with colleagues or friends or the making a presentation, or even in real life, whether it be interviewed, because in you know, for my, my line of work, there's a lot of interviews that are being set up with reporters. And sometimes, you know, the ones that the people who are always getting quoted are the ones who are just getting good quotes. And it's sort of behooves people before they make presentations before they speak with people before they, you know, have their decks ready. You know, what, what really fun Interesting, pithy, memorable line zingers. You know, Will people remember when they walk away from our conversation and, or my presentation or however I'm communicating with these people or a group, I have a nickname for this, this group will need these kinds of lines. And I call them money lines. You know, I've actually spent some time working on a new york city mayoral campaign during the late part of the winter. And one that was always one of the things is sitting there was almost like working in a, you know, in a writers room and a TV show, what lines can we give them? That, you know, during the debate during the interview, during when they speak to these people, when they speak to when they're fundraising, that people are going to, it's going to hit them, they're going to it's going to land, as they say, so I call them money lines,

Will Bachman 06:02

give it give us an example of a sort of non pithy line that someone might say, and what would be the zinger version or the money line version of that? Yeah, have any examples off the cuff?

Drew Kerr 06:16

Sure, you know, a perfect example would be somebody who, you know, you could read in financial publications, or you're speaking with somebody or or candidate, or you might say something about, let's say about schools, a school situation, and what's going to happen with schools, with kids going online versus in, you know, classes, and you might say something along the lines of, well, you know, kids are anxious to get back to school. You know, let's, you know, let's put them on a bus stop. You know, and, and, you know, let's hope that they, you know, things work out well, you know, just very sort of blabs a bland language, you know, people just they don't really think about how can I phrase this in some particular way as math fact is actually, let me just even shift There's even an example, a great example of this in today's New York Times, where they just unveiled the, the the infrastructure plan, you know, President Biden has just been, you know, unveiled and he has to convince, he has to convince people that this plan will drive jobs, and most of these jobs are going to be related to clean energy and climate change. And he's facing a lot of skepticism. He made the announcement in Pittsburgh. So, you know, when they they could, when they interview somebody, they could easily say, Well, I don't believe this

kind of stuff. And, you know, I've been working on these kinds of things all my life. You know, what's, what's climate change, and that's pretty ordinary language. But then, today, in the paper, the head of the Boilermakers local 154, in Pittsburgh, he had the best, personally the best money line I've seen today, and you're gonna remember this. He says, He says, politicians keep saying, we're going to transition you into solar jobs. That's not how it works. We build power plants, petrochemical plants, and maintain steel mills. And then he says, and here's, here's really where he nails it. He says, would you ask Tom Brady to play middle linebacker, just because he's a football player? That's a money line. Has nothing to do with jobs, necessarily directly has to do with climate change. But he summed everything up in that one line that everybody could understand about, would you have Tom Brady play outside his position? You know, um, you know, I'm the kind of person sometimes who will tell clients, you know, would you have an electrician do a plumbers job? And, you know, cuz sometimes people say, if you run into clients will say, Well, I could do this job myself. And then, you know, my, my response to them is, would you have an electrician do a plumbers job? And of course, they say no, but they know that line. That's a money line, a line that people remember. You have it ready.

Will Bachman 09:47

Yeah. I mean, that's, Reagan could have said, you know, Mr. Gorbachev, I encourage you to liberalize transportation policy and allow greater freedom of movement. But instead, you know, Mr. Gorbachev tear down this wall. A little bit more memorable.

Drew Kerr 10:03

Right? It's, it's, it's the drama of it there there was. There's another one, I'm going to give you another one, because when I see them, and I think people should learn from them when you hear this, there was one in the Wall Street Journal who and there was a fellow who was talking about the overlap of people who play video games. And the people who trade in cryptocurrency and stock traders, that there's an overlap of people who are interested in all three right cryptocurrency video games and trading stocks. And he had this great line. And he said, it's the same game, it's the same skill set. Day Trading is basically sitting in a game or chair with multiple screens playing a game.

Will Bachman 10:46

Perfect. That's a perfect money one, you get it? it lands. Yeah. Your next rule is use a story or anecdote to hit home.

Drew Kerr 10:58

Right? So Plato, we're good old Plato, remember him from the old philosophy days, he had really one of the great quotes, and he said, Those who tell the stories, rule society. And he knew what he was talking about, well, readers and listeners gravitate towards well told examples and sketches, you know, it is the tendency of people to get up during presentations, or when they speak to people, and rattle off numbers, and rattle off stats, and rattle off those things. And, you know, very sort of numbers and theories and things like that. And that all sounds good. And for some people, you know, it could make their eyes kind of glaze over. But when you put something in the form of the story, like a personal anecdote, it takes on a whole different meaning because people identify with stories, it gives them a little bit of an emotional hook into something, you know, as I like to say, and I still see this cat TV campaign going on, there's that nutrition app. It's a dating app called neum. And you see this very often

on TV campaigns. But you know, this one comes to mind because it's, it runs. And it's and they call their TV campaign NuMe stories, because they want you to identify with the stories of these people who are, you know, working on their nutrition and working on their diet to eat better. So they have these stories, they could rattle off stats, and say, Well, you know, 40% of this and add in and you know, if you eat 30%, less this, and you're like, oh, man, I've heard this before, and it's just numbers. But when you see people and it's a story, it takes on an emotional dimension. You know, that's why and this is something that I always coach clients with that think about personal situations that have happened to you. Sometimes people sometimes find when they when they go bike riding or they're on a flight or they're on a bus, or they're driving and their mind is cleared. And they notice something that's kind of where sparks happen. And they figure out, oh, I was just reading this, or I was coming here today. And there's a reason what the best presentations usually start with an anecdote, something that happened in real life that that happened to that person. And they will, because you want to go with them on that story.

Will Bachman 13:52

Yeah, so tell a story. And then number four, picture the headline first, lead with the Oh, that's what we say. McKinsey. Exactly.

Drew Kerr 14:02

There's a you know, a lot of people try to figure out how do I how do I say this? How do I explain this? Where do I start? When I want to make this presentation, when I want to write this this opinion piece, when I want to write this memo to the staff, this email, but I don't know which order to put it in or how to tell it. Instead of starting with the body of the content first, think of the headline that you would want to see or a headline for it or the subject line. You know, because it gives it a structure. You know, people see headlines all the time and that's what makes them want to read a story or listen to something when on television. They promote you know, upcoming segment coming up with you know, upcoming you know how you can you know how you can find ways of negotiating that car lease deal. And that's the headline, it's all summed up. But it gives you a structure from where to start. So the exercise that I recommend when before you draft anything, or you're making a deck is think of contrast some headlines, you know, and tinker with the words, make it look like a real headline, you know, the kind that you read in a newspaper or a magazine, or that you see online, or it looks like something you might see on Twitter. You know, clickbait, usually some of the best headlines, there's a reason why they're clickbait because they're compelling headlines, study them, come up with some draft drafts of, you know, potential headlines. And then until you get one that says pretty much what you want to say what you would, if this was a story, this is what I would want the headline to say, and then craft your, your message to support your headline, because as long as you use that headline as your focal point, and you're supporting it, you can't go wrong, you stay right on track, and people will zero in on your message.

Will Bachman 16:25

You know, that's, that's a pretty good rule, not just for your whole document, but also for talking a slide deck for each individual page. Right. So certainly, the training I had at McKinsey was, every page should have one single clear takeaway, and that should go in the headline, and the headline of the

page should be what is the takeaway of the page. So so both goes at like the overall document level, but then each individual page should have one key message that you're trying to convey?

Drew Kerr 16:54

Exactly, the headline is a great device. And it applies even for creating a subject line that you want somebody to read. You know, a lot of people kind of take subject lines for granted. When they sit, you know, some people will send a subject line question, you know, this, what does that mean? But if you kind of put pose it as a headline, or something more compelling like that, you know, the odds are somebody will open it up. And that is a form of communication to have having them open it up. So, headlines, headlines is a great structural technique for communications, as as you said, and, you know,

Will Bachman 17:41

we don't get a lot of instruction on on emails in the modern world, but that's the policy or the practice that I've adopted with, with emails that I send, I typically will make my subject line, I try to be very clear, if it's a request or a everards information, it'd be something like, you know, Catherine, please, you know, attached as a draft for your review, please approve, or something like that would be my, you know, a subject line or, you know, you know, please sign the attached NDA or, you know, requests you confirm that this is true, or something, or Please investigate the following the following. That's the way I make it so that subject lines kind of stand out in someone's email in basket, that there's a clear request or action expected from it, rather than just like, update.

Drew Kerr 18:39

It's, it's true, I think, as those are all great exercises, and all great understandings of how subject lines work, and you did one thing you mentioned one thing, well, that I do, too, that I almost never say, in subject lines, and that is putting the person's first name in the subject line to personalize it. Yeah, I don't know if it's annoying to people. But that's what I often will do. If I'm, you know, sending it to a person and expecting them to take action, kind of people pay attention to their name, and it alerts people a little bit.

Will Bachman 19:13

Let's go to number five. So you said rule number five is say the most in the least amount of words.

Drew Kerr 19:20

This is something that I used to tell my staff, I had staff for quite a long time in my practice and still believe in this especially because people only have so much time and they're multitasking. And sometimes we're restricted to word counts. And we want to put power, a lot of power, the most power in our words without having people you know, lose interest. So that is my slogan. Again, one of my last offset slogans is, say the most in the least amount of words. You've got to fight to get people's attention and respect Their time. So, look at whatever you're writing and whatever you are presenting. And then, and then say to yourself, how can I say this in the least amount of words. And it's, it's, you know, it's, it's To me, it's like going to the gym, and or even being a magazine editor and, you know, editing a story or a film editor, how do I get to the essence of what I want to say without any waste. So chop, condense, edit, you know, packing the most amount of meaning in the shortest amount of words. I always think of people, I always say to folks, you know, write and think and speak in the most active voice in the most

proactive way, not the passive. So instead of saying, something like, you know, the 33rd largest country in the world produces the most oil, you know, in the world, you can just say, Venezuela produces the world's most oil. You know, there's, there's a way of compacting things, of making things short, tight, and meaningful that people will get, especially these days when there's just such a lack of time. So, you know, when we talked about subject line, and we talked about emails, all our communication, you want to make every word count, with substance, and variety.

Will Bachman 21:31

I hadn't I had no idea about, I had no idea about Venezuela being the biggest producer, is that true? That is true. Wow, I had no idea. Let's, let's talk about your practice a little bit, four corners, communications, tell us a little bit about the clients that you serve and the services you provide?

Drew Kerr 21:48

Sure, so for coins, I've been around Four Corners to 30 years. It's hard to believe. And I've always I specialize in media companies, now digital media companies, fast growing startups, and consumer research firms and helping them with all their communications from their wording, their positioning their public relations, to apply for awards, getting them on panels, and training them to moderate and Keynote. So, you know, it's, these are important communications functions for this specific group. You know, sometimes they get recruited for things because I'm known for being I guess, scrappy, I guess is a good way to put it, at least that's what people tell me. I have a good friend of mine who says, You're my, you're my third base coach. Because I'm the guy who just coaches him and, you know, signals him and tells him what to do. And he says, You're my best third base coach. So that's what I do. I, you know, I work with companies. And I tend to also work organically. And that's always been a hallmark of mine working on site, which has not been easy during the pandemic. But I tend to work a lot of a lot on site, my clients offices,

Will Bachman 23:22

tell us about your tips on how to be a good moderator. That's an interesting, you know, I can understand helping someone, prepare and rehearse a keynote. And that's an interesting, you know, expertise to help people be a good moderator. What are some of your tips there?

Drew Kerr 23:39

Well, you know, being a moderator is, you know, you're playing a few different roles. You're, you're, you're a traffic cop. You're, you know, you're kind of playing Alex Tabak you know, the game show host. You know, there's, there's a lot of, you know, a lot of playing a number of different number of different roles. So, you know, moderator is letting people realizing that, that you're as a ringmaster, in a sense, you're allowed to you know, keep things moving and that's kind of the thing to know to get people familiar with with each other before they present and speak. But you're also keeping things going and interesting and knowing when people go on too long and how to politely stop them you know, there you sometimes deal with people who are you know, go on and on and on. And, and so you have to kind of be that ringmaster to politely move thing you have to be that traffic cop to keep things going. Let every let your panelists speak. Get their points across and Always leave enough time to have your q&a. The other thing that's important about being a moderator is that you don't want this to be an inside baseball affair. Sometimes panels, you know, they get very chummy. And they're all speaking about

these things. And you feel like more that you're eavesdropping on to a bunch of people sitting at a restaurant talking about things that they know. And they're not really benefiting the audience. So a good moderator made sure makes sure that this is not an inside baseball affair, and that they're not speaking to each other, but they're speaking to the audience and sharing practical good advice, information and viewpoints.

Will Bachman 25:53

Now, I understand that you're going to be setting up a new business in the near future, and share a little bit about that.

Drew Kerr 26:00

Sure. I've been working on this for a while. The business the the spin off is called Every business has a story. And it originated when I was invited to, to speak, I guess it's in front of a group of entrepreneurs at a sort of a getaway for us like like a boot camp. And I had come up with this concept that about storytelling, that the best stories that are about 10, or 12 classic story structures, especially with movies, that people all know whether they realize it or not, and that many companies just don't know how to start telling their own story. So after studying many headlines studying many companies, and whether how they tell their stories, and whether they tell their stories, and why they should tell their stories, launching it next month. And it's based on what I call, and certainly familiar now that we're talking about it during this this podcast. I call it headlines and storylines. First creating headlines. For the for the message for how you want to tell your story, your your company's story, your own story. And then following a classic movie plot structure to create that story about how your company came to be including obstacles. A lot of a lot of people leave out the obstacles as if nothing ever bad ever happened to them. But frankly, every company faces obstacles and talking about them is not only therapeutic, but people identify with that because they go through those things themselves. So they want to hear how you overcame those, those obstacles. So it's it's all surrounding that concept about coming up with the headline and then the story that goes with it with a particular structure.

Will Bachman 28:22

Fantastic. Andrew, if people wanted to find out more about your work online and connect with you, where would you Where would you point them and we can include these links in the show notes. Sure.

Drew Kerr 28:34

My My website is www.Four-Corners and hyphen. And then comm they connect with me through LinkedIn. Drew Kerr at four corners, communications. Those are probably the best ways to find me.

Will Bachman 28:55

Great. We'll include links in the show notes. Drew, thank you for joining us today sharing some rules on communications. It was great to connect and hear a bit about your practice.

Drew Kerr 29:06

Thank you. We'll always great to hear your voice and, and your great podcast too.

Will Bachman 29:12

Thank you very much. And listeners if you go to umbrex.com and click on the Unleashed tab, you can sign up for our weekly email where I will let you know about the most recent episodes. Don't need to listen to all of them, but I'll give you a short summary and give you some occasional bonus material. If you're so inclined to give this show a five star review in iTunes. That would be much appreciated. It helps people discover the show. Thanks for listening