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Out with the mold

Liam Scott has a high-sounding name for the work his agency does. But what does he mean by "corporate theatre"?

Like many veteran speechwriters, Toronto-based freelancer Liam Scott has come to the conclusion that the formal speech is dying if not dead. These days, audiences put a premium on authenticity, not on ideas. "A day after a speech, people may not remember what you said, but they'll remember what they think of you."

And if you read your speech yesterday, and used a slick TelePrompter and hid behind your PowerPoint, they won't think well of you today-especially if you delivered a typical corporate speech, Scott adds: "Ninety-five percent of the speeches I see read as if they were all written by the same computer."

Of course, most speechwriters know all this is true; many CEOs know it but do nothing to enliven their message. CEOs from hidebound industries like banking, Scott says, are "anxious to be on message all the time. They feel the need to be part of the machine, even though they know the audiences aren't buying it."

In seven years since he quit his last traditional speechwriting job to found Sugarvision, Scott has been clever and lucky enough to find corporate leaders who are interested in communicating effectively with modern audiences-and willing to take the necessary chances.

RR asked Scott how he transforms traditional executive communication into what he calls

"corporate theatre."

What is corporate theatre?

The typical corporate event is a pep rally with the theme "Go Big" or "Pump It Up." Scott's productions are often much more elaborate.

To wit: He created a six-act musical play for a meeting of car dealers in Las Vegas. The play, which involved a chorus girl and the ghosts of the Rat Pack, interspersed thematically and creatively supported executive presentations about the need for car companies to rise from the middle to the top of their industry.

Scott didn't just suggest the idea and write the script. "We created the entire package," he says, adding that he thinks "that's where the future lies" for speechwriters and others involved in executive communication.

Not all of Scott's case studies are so gaudy; many are simple, and most of them seem designed to involve humanizing corporate issues. In his first meeting with the CEO of a shopping-mall empire who wanted to meaningfully mark the 40th anniversary of its founding, Scott ascertained that the CEO himself was turning 40. On the spot, he came up with the theme for the event:

The comparison between an organization turning 40 and a person turning 40-a time to consider your health, a time to evaluate your strengths and weaknesses, etc.-and the CEO bought it immediately.

Some of Scott's ideas, in fact, are characterized by their simplicity. A telecommunications CEO client was one of a series of speakers at a technology conference. Scott looked at the program and noted that all the other presentations were highly technical in nature and he surmised all of them would involve an impressive PowerPoint presentation. So he advised his client to do no PowerPoint and instead to get up there and just tell a story. The CEO, a longtime client, agreed only grudgingly, telling Scott, "I'll try it. But if it bombs it's your fault." He didn't blame Scott when conference-goers were slapping him on the back and thanking him for sparing them another PowerPoint snoozer.

Scott says the common difference between traditional corporate meetings and his corporate theater is that his shows respect the intelligence of his audience. "I try to make it a little smarter," he says.

A great idea: Amateur guest speakers

In his effort to put on smart events for corporations trying to communicate, Scott has stumbled upon an innovation of a different kind: He's been using nonprofessional guest speakers with specialized experience that can inform corporate themes.

For instance, he's found an uncelebrated pro hockey player who played 17 years for 18 teams. Imagining how many times the guy had to move his belongings, meet new teammates, learn to deal with a new coach, Scott thought: "Who better to talk about change?"

Similarly, he's got a gossip columnist to talk about getting people to open up, a pit boss to talk about teamwork in general and a pilot who successfully crash-landed an airliner to talk about teamwork under pressure.

Gathering this group is a big job; Scott says he's talked to about 50 potential guest speakers, eliminating half of them from contention just from talking to them on the phone. Once he identifies potential guest speakers, Scott has to help them tell their stories in a compelling way that fits the corporate event-and he has to do some speech coaching.

But the time he sinks into that work, he says, is more than made up by the savings and the authenticity created by *not* spending \$50,000 on a big-name speaking-circuit hack. Sometime this year, Scott hopes to build a stable of these semi-pro speakers and, in addition to using them for Sugarvision events, perhaps also offer them through a separate speaker's bureau of his own creation.

How to transform your work into corporate theater

What creative communicator wouldn't prefer to create a fascinating event to a stale old speech? But how to sell big ideas to cautious clients?

Scott says there are two essential ways:

1. Building up trust with clients over time so that they'll take a risk on your recommendation.
2. "Having the confidence to suggest an idea right away" with a new client, Scott says.

And, it goes without saying, having a good idea at the ready.