

Research: The Work Behind the Words

© Jean Gogolin

When I was speechwriter to the CEO of a minicomputer company, I wrote a speech that described some of the nifty tricks the company's new superminicomputer could perform, one of which was aiding research into the then-hot subject of chaos theory.

The description was the opener, intended to draw the audience in without over-hyping the new product.

Now chaos theory is a pretty arcane subject that took a lot of research to understand. But since the audience was fairly technical, I included just enough explanation to intrigue them without burying them in detail.

Before I took the draft upstairs to the CEO's office for him to review, I added a marginal note saying we'd illustrated the speech with graphics often used to explain chaos theory, the fractal geometric sets developed by physicist Benoit Mandelbrot. Then I took the draft upstairs. In about an hour the phone rang.

"Jean," he said, "What's chaos?"

Resisting the temptation to try for wit, I offered to prepare some background material for him to read on the plane.

"Good," he said. "Just give me enough so if somebody asks a question, I can blow 'em off."

That's still one of my favorite CEO stories. And it illustrates a couple of things about life in corporate communications. One is that even the smartest executives can ask some pretty bizarre questions, and we'd better be ready to answer. By the time he asked that question, I had enough material that I could prepare a backgrounder fast.

The other lesson is that underlying the typical 20-minute speech lies a ton of research -- whether the subject is

technology, real estate, high finance, or the status of women in the third world.

The speechwriter's job is to dig through the sources, cull out the most interesting bits, and then package them in a way that's accurate, compelling and entertaining.

Today, when virtually every word that issues from an executive's mouth is scrutinized, accuracy is more important than ever. Just ask political candidates.

After that chaos speech I got in the habit of writing one draft with footnotes, so I'll remember where every bit of information came from if anyone asks, even months later. I do another version without the footnotes for the executive to use when he's making the presentation.

As it turned out, that real answer to that "What's chaos?" question is that it's what we communicators are paid to avoid.

###