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The Human Side of Business Communications: Interview With Kathy Klotz-Guest

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The Human Side of Business Communications: An Interview With Kathy Klotz-Guest

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Business communication is broken, but don't take my word for it. In May 2013, the PMI released its annual "[Pulse of the Profession](#)" report. Specifically, "\$135 million is at risk for every \$1 billion spent on a project. Further research on the importance of effective communications uncovers that a startling 56 percent (\$75 million of that \$135 million) is at risk due to ineffective communications." I unearthed

fascinating stats such as these while researching [*Message Not Received: Why Business Communication Is Broken and How to Fix It.*](#)

Along with relying too much on email, far too often at work we use jargon when simple language would suffice. It doesn't just offend the language sensibilities of learned folks, it's just plain bad business.

Against this backdrop, I recently sat down with Kathy Klotz-Guest, MA, MBA and the founder of Keeping it Human, Inc. In short, her company helps organizations turn complex communications into compelling stories on which customers and employees can act. Aside from her business bona fides, she has performed improvisational comedy and stand-up on Bay Area stages for almost 20 years.

Is she funny? I'll let you decide.

PS: What do you do?

KKG: I help teams (marketing, product, even engineering!) and executives become better storytellers and communicators. Some of my tools come from the storytelling world of stage improvisation and comedy where I have over 20 years' of experience -- well that, and 20 years in marketing for high-tech companies which is the exact opposite of comedy! My company, Keeping it HumanSM, is my corporate marketing and stage storytelling experience merged to help people be better storytellers.



PS: How did you get into this kind of work?

KKG: I started my business to make company communications better by being more human. In high-tech, my company produced such jargon-laden marketing that we could have sold it to the CIA as advanced interrogation techniques! Customers don't want this stuff-that's what management asked for. I thought if I want more human communication inside and outside the company, I couldn't be the only marketer who feels this way! That's an understatement. People -- employees and customers -- are hungry for communication that is compelling, story-driven, simple and even, at times, fun! I like to joke that audiences are 92.3% human and no audience wants facts, jargon and self-focused (me, me, me!) business-speak.

PS: What makes you different from other communications consultants?

KKG: I am a comedy nerd! Along with 20 years in marketing and communication, I have 20 years' experience in sketch comedy, stand-up and improvisation Comedy has taught me so much about collaboration, listening, supporting and making your teammates look good, and about 'yes, and-ing' ideas that come your way (rather than saying 'no' or 'yes, but'-both of which shut down great communication and innovation). And I help teams and leaders improve their communication and collaboration in the same way. 'Yes, and' is more than the central tenet of improvisation; it's a powerful business mindset that creates positive communication dynamics and gets better results.

PS: What challenges do you help companies overcome?

KKG: The first is enabling clear communication and storytelling inside the organization-inside teams, from executives, and across teams. Without it, teams, creativity, and innovation can get stuck. The second challenge is a lack of compelling storytelling and communications outside the organization to customers. I help marketing teams become great storytellers inside and outside the organization. The challenges are related. If a company isn't clear internally, how the heck can customers understand what the company cares about?

PS: What can people do to communicate better?

KKG: Three things can really make a difference in how you communicate:

1. Have empathy for your audience-internal or external. Wrap your head around who they are and what they really need. Maybe their pain is too much work and not enough resources. Or they are worried about their reputation-all human needs, not product needs! People have too much complexity already. So simplicity in communications is the only antidote for the amount of noise and complexity today.
2. Stop using jargon. Ask yourself, "Is there a simpler way to explain this?" People are busy and don't have time to decode your message. Use a simple, powerful story instead. Stories with emotional resonance work wonders where data alone doesn't! Even better: wrap data in a memorable, emotional story.
3. Focus on the most important point. If you could only leave people with one takeaway, what would it be? Next, eliminate unimportant detail. Think of your big headline as a tweet with 140 characters. What would your big message be? Start with that one big idea and explain it in the most simple language possible.