

From Classroom To Boardroom

Priscilla Morris lets us in on the secrets of taking on corporate work.

When I founded my Speech & Drama School in 1972 I expected to spend the whole of my working life in the education sector but things took a dramatic turn in the year 2000.

I had been receiving regular enquiries via Yellow Pages from adults requiring help with vocal development and public speaking. These enquiries increased considerably in the late 1990's and it occurred to me that there might be interest in what I had to offer in the business sector. This is the story of how I made the leap from the classroom to boardroom, complete with the mistakes I made and the important lessons I learnt.

As I had never really worked in the corporate world I needed advice on how to get started. This involved an initial investment of several thousand pounds with a business PR and management company. They did research into my specialism, came up with the name Loud & Clear communication skills, designed business materials (letterheads, compliment slips, business cards and A5 card flyers) and introduced me to the local Chamber of Commerce. Armed with my newly minted business cards I set off to network. For any of you who have ever attempted this you will know that you only have to attend one networking event to be invited to ten more! I am really



not joking, and I quickly learnt that the best way to get yourself noticed was to turn up at as many as possible. So, for the next 18 months or so I did breakfast meetings, (usually arriving by 6:45am), lunch meetings and the occasional late afternoon/early evening. All of these cost money, of course, from £10 to £25 on average but I was able to subsidise my costs from my drama school income and the occasional new private client.

I learnt that networking requires a great deal of perseverance and is very unlikely to bring you immediate business. You have to be in it for the long haul, but it allows you to meet a lot of potential clients in a short time and helps you build trust and understanding, which is an essential requirement in business. I do much less networking now than I did but annual membership fees still cost me in excess of £2000. You work out fairly quickly which networking groups work for you.

The real purpose of networking is to get yourself noticed and to inform others of what you can offer and how this will benefit their business. If people do not see a benefit which they can quantify in monetary terms, they are unlikely to hire you. What I learnt during the first 18 months, was that I was offering 'Voice coaching' and not 'Communication Skills', (which had a much broader remit). The business cards were therefore adjusted for the next print run. I

also noted what people really wanted to achieve. Key areas of concern were:

Volume – usually being too quiet but sometimes too loud.

Clarity – lazy speech or lack of control resulting in rapid pace and muffled delivery.

Accents – issues with understanding caused by a strong UK accent or English as a second language.

Monotone voice – lack of vocal range and emotional engagement.

Fear of public speaking.

Based on the information I had gained while networking I developed a range of half and full day courses which I marketed through social media and speaking at networking events (usually for free). These were then delivered, as open courses, regularly in the East and West Midlands.

By using feedback forms, testimonials and recommendations I was able to provide proof of the results of training which were vital in establishing my expertise and the value of voice coaching. I found that the science behind communication was particularly useful in this regard and I did a considerable amount of reading and research to enhance my knowledge of this in a business context.

When starting a new business, there are often government grants available to help you with initial expenses – you just need to look for them. In Loud & Clear's 2nd year I was offered a two day export course by U.K.T.I. (trade and industry) for £200. The course itself was interesting but the grants that were offered after it were even more so and this enabled me to have a 10 minute promotional DVD made by a local video production company for half the normal price – a saving of around £1500 in 2002. I still give these to interested companies who inquire about my services. Have I ever exported, you may ask? Well not directly, but I have worked with individual clients by Skype in as far flung outposts as Hong Kong.

During the mid noughties it became more and more important to have a web presence. A basic site was designed initially and this was built upon with advice from experts to make it visible to Google. It currently has about 15 pages which include downloads and testimonials. I began writing a monthly blog in 2008 and this goes out to my database (gathered through networking) each month. Blogs should be instructive and relevant and they are a useful way to keep the content changing on your website, which is necessary if you want to maintain a high rating. I can't find time to look after the website myself so it is managed by someone else and has gone through Search Engine Optimisation to ensure words appear in the right places and in the right ratio (not my forte I'm afraid!)

I was asked to write articles for sporting and business magazines and to date have written



about a dozen. This is also something that establishes you as an expert in your field. You then get asked to write guest blogs for others and this spreads your name to their databases too.

Private clients came originally from Yellow Pages, then from direct contact while networking and more recently also from referrals and the contacts page of the website. Training programmes are worked out on a bespoke basis and usually require a proposal including objectives, details of the sessions to be delivered and the final outcomes achieved. Current 1-2-1 clients include a local politician a senior manager from a company in Hertfordshire, an Asian chef, a doctor, a university engineer and several self-employed entrepreneurs.

Through taking all public speaking opportunities which were offered at networking events I began to get interest from corporate firms who needed speakers for in-house events. This was usually paid work and often led to a follow-up workshop.

At an early speaking event I was approached by the organizer of the Women's Network at B.T. in Leicester to take a workshop for her. The success of this led to several more workshops in Leicester and Ipswich and then interest from Leeds where I delivered a management workshop on voice for the internal training programme. After providing occasional workshops and working with individual B.T. managers for around 3 years, I was delighted to receive Approved Provider status for B.T. nationally. So the lesson here is clearly determination and staying power. I learnt early on that no corporate organization would be interested in unproven training. I did try cold-calling in the early days but could never get past the gate-keeper. If you are lucky enough to have any contacts within a company, use them. Everything is fair in love and business!



It took several years before I was getting regular enquiries from larger companies but recently I have done workshops for National Grid, Capital One, The Guinness Partnership, Co-op Financial and Samworth Brothers so it is possible to make your mark as a one-woman-band but your website needs to be highly visible and you need to be seen at business events.

One way to achieve this is to take part in business exhibitions. I aim to take a stand at three or four per year around the Midlands. I would expect to pay between £100 to £400 for the stand, and if you can also get a slot as a seminar speaker this will boost your profile at the event. You will need advertising material for this so think about what you can give away in the form of handouts,

small booklets, C.D's etc.

You also need one or two pull-up banners to catch the attention and I would consult a graphic designer before having them printed. Spend a little more (mine cost £250) and they will not collapse on you! Mine have been in use at many events for nearly 10 years.

Let us now tackle 'social media'. In today's business

world you need to be regularly seen to be successful and you need to keep your name in the public eye. If you are a celebrity, this is relatively easy, but if you are just 'Joe Bloggs' you need to have a plan. My chosen media platforms are 'LinkedIn and Twitter (although I understand that Google+ is now up and coming). I have around 2000 connections on LinkedIn and 2500 on Twitter. Each morning I spend 30 minutes or so replying to responses or sending out useful information. Social media should not be used to sell but to educate others and you quickly learn how it works best for you. I will look at my phone several times a day (if I can) and post something appropriate. Sometimes I tell people what I am doing and sometimes I share some interesting facts about voice coaching. There is an etiquette which you are expected to adhere to which includes thanking people who share your

material, but it can pay dividends if you use it well. I have had several good pieces of work from social media contacts and would recommend you give it a try.

Then of course there is YouTube! You can't get away without using video on your website and as an information source. Today, Google is searching for this and it helps your ranking. Surveys show that most searchers will only look at pages 1 and possibly 2, so you need to maintain your presence there. I use my YouTube channel to give free basic lessons and this drives traffic to my website. I know I need to put more on but there are only so many hours in the day...

So what of the future? Well, although I am slowing down a little, I still intend to mix my speech and drama work with some business contracts. In S&D I do 2 evenings a week of private students and also do examining and adjudicating when it comes along. Under the Loud & Clear banner I have several interesting jobs coming up before the summer break:

- A leadership workshop in Northants.
- A workshop on vocal engagement in Kent.
- Workshops for the Royal College of Paediatrics in London.
- Speaking for Derbys & Notts Chamber of Commerce.
- A keynote speech & seminar at a Glasgow conference.
- A workshop for a large accountancy firm in London.
- After-dinner speaking for Medical Women's conference.

Oh, and there may be a book on the table too!

Would I recommend anyone else to take the same route to market that I did? Yes, but do not expect it to be easy and do not expect immediate success. If you stick it out you can expect remuneration for your efforts to be substantial but the business world is fickle so only do it if you

love it. That's a good maxim for any business don't you think?

Good luck!

Since leaving the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in 1971, Priscilla has been teaching speech & drama to all ages, in schools and in private practice.

She has been a LAMDA examiner since 1986, a British Federation adjudicator since 1991, and National Voice Consultant to the ASA since 1998.

Priscilla is a published author on Shakespeare and a Voice Care Network Tutor. She now spends most of her time working with business professional when she's not on the high seas as a Guest Speaker for P&O and Cunard Cruises.