Are these essentials in your communications tool-kit?

• Spear Communications

Understand. Be understood.

What comes to your mind when I say Communications?

I've asked hundreds of people this question, and most say the same thing:

Getting your message out!

That's true. Communications *does* involve that.

But as we communications professionals know, there are many other functions in the job.

I'd say that, at bottom, an effective communications pro is three things.

1) a problem anticipator 2) a problem solver, and 3) a problem preventer.

As a result of my work, I've developed a killer communications tool-kit.

I've even humorously placed a wand in it, because some days I feel like I have to perform magic.

With my communications tool-kit in place, I'm ready for anything!

Here's what my tool-kit contains

A database. Who are the important people in your business? Figure it out, and develop a database. Always start with the gatekeepers. For example, lowly media producers are more important than media celebrities. Executive assistants are more important than CEOs and Presidents. The front-line staff are more important than the guys up in the corner offices. Why? Because they open the gate. Or they don't. Memorize their names and their phone numbers. Learn the names of their children. Develop a rapport with them. It all begins with a good database.

A contact log. Some software, such as Outlook, allows you to track your interactions, but I'm old-school when it comes to keeping a log. How you do this isn't the point. Just do it. Track who you speak to, when you spoke to them, and what you discussed. Include an organization name and contact number. Over time, this becomes a handy database. If you take a lot of media calls, as I do, you'll soon have valuable contact details.

Toothbrush, floss, mouthwash, breath mints. You know the drill.

The Chicago Manual of Style. This book will answer thousands of questions related to written communications.

AP Stylebook. A good resource for media-oriented writing such as press releases.

Chambers Dictionary. Any decent

dictionary will do, paper or electronic. I use two British dictionaries–Chambers (paper) and the Oxford English Dictionary (electronic). American users will want an American dictionary.

Made to Stick. Written by Chip and Dan Heath, this classic shows you how to write copy that grabs and holds your reader's attention.

Scrivener. The most powerful writing software available, Scrivener will help you with everything from press releases to your next screenplay. I write all my articles in Scrivener. It's brilliant.

A pocket recorder. For this one, a smartphone will do. You should have some way to record audio, whether it's a note to yourself or an interview.

Templates. And lots of them–for everything from day-to-day correspondence to release forms to contracts.

TV attire. Back in the day, when I worked out of a corporate office, I had a closet where I kept a suit for unanticipated media work or meetings with politicians. Chances are that if you need something like this, you already have it. In any case, that spare wardrobe will come in handy.

A back-up hard copy of everything. Because it never fails. The speech you wrote will have been left in the cab when your board director arrives at the event. Your President won't have his copy of the PowerPoint for the meeting. You'll arrive for the workshop to find that the documents you shipped across the country were shredded yesterday by an intern. So follow the cardinal rule of communications and **never have just one of anything**. Your tool-kit should always have copies of mission-critical materials.

Portable hard drive. I always expect the unexpected. A portable hard drive allows me to access files on the road.

Cables. Strangely enough, my ability to connect everything to everything else has saved my butt numerous times over the years. The CEO has a file on his toaster that he wants to read on his iPad? **No problem**! [Pulls out toaster-to-iPad cable]

A quality messenger bag. I mean, you have to haul all this stuff around! So have a bag that is efficient, organized, comfortable, and well-made. I highly recommend my Tom Bihn "Empire Builder."

Zamzar. Not as mission-critical as it once was, Zamzar nonetheless is a handy website that converts over 1,200 file types, for free. It was a blessing back when I worked for a company that used PCs and WordPerfect–and there I was, the lone Mac/Word user on the company network. (I am not making this up.) Some of our board members were also Mac/Word users. Zamzar to the rescue.

Dropbox. A great way to share files and to collaborate on projects.

Google News Alerts. You can set Google News to send an email when a keyword appears in a news source, anywhere and anytime. Your company name, your product, your brand, or your industry are keywords. So, for example, I get an email every time one of my clients is mentioned in the news.

Evernote. Back in the day, I used an obscure PC program called Tombo. This freeware, .txt tree-view note manager allowed me to store and search an unlimited number of press clippings, with a very small footprint. When I switched to a Mac, I used a program called Notational Velocity. Now I use Evernote to clip media articles on-the-fly.

Instapaper. Another web-clipping program, you can grab anything off the web as you surf, and then read it later.

Hootsuite. Think of this as the Google News Alert for social media. It's a versatile, highly-customizable and powerful tool to monitor your company's presence on the social web. You can even schedule your posts.

Topsy. Another tool to monitor what the Internet is saying about your company, your product, and your market.

A resilient, can-do attitude. Whatever comes my way, I'll handle it. I'll find the right solution to the problem, and I'll get the job done to deadline. This attitude has served me well for over 25 years, and it's a must for every pro's tool-kit.

A magic wand doesn't hurt, either.

Now it's your turn. What's in your communications toolkit?

– Wayne K. Spear is the Founder and President of Spear Communications. This article is part of his ongoing seriescalled "Thought Bombs."