

The adoption of APA's new communications plan highlights the importance of marketing and public relations strategies for planning agencies, firms, and organizations. That's familiar territory for Joan Capelin, principal of Capelin Communications, a 25-year-old New York company known for its work with architects, engineers, and planners, and a fellow of the Public Relations Society of America. Her newest project is an informal, anecdote-filled book called *Communication by Design: Marketing Professional Services*.

**Q.** *Your book is directed primarily to principals of professional firms. What about the more general reader?*

**A.** I think it's useful for anyone. The need for effective communication is pretty much the same in any organization.

**Q.** *Is there much difference between working for architecture and planning firms?*

**A.** Planners have a special problem because it's harder to engage people in a plan than in a design. Planners are the ones with the vision and they're generally the most articulate members of a project team. But planning is a slow process. And what's dramatic about a plan? It's a challenge to get the media to pay attention.



Capelin Communications

**Q.** *So what do you do?*

**A.** First of all, you have to have a story to tell. You have to make the reporter understand what makes this project important. "Tell them who you are" is one of the 29 principles in the book. Another one is "Follow up beyond belief"—FUBB. That can mean lots of things—from checking to see if your e-mail reached the right person to an exit interview with a client. Following up should be automatic.

**Q.** *Have you done much work for public agencies?*

**A.** Yes, some. For instance, I helped the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey with outreach for airport planning projects. But on the whole, it's more difficult to work with public agencies because they have so many restrictions on disclosing information. Consultants often are forbidden to talk about the work the agency is doing. That makes it doubly hard to do marketing and public relations.

**Q.** *What's the difference between marketing, publicity, and public relations?*

**A.** Marketing is basically anything you do to get your firm in the path of work that's right for it. Our role is to give clients the necessary tools to do that effectively. Publicity is getting people into print, on the air, or now, on the Internet. Public relations is larger. It has to do with the way your firm or agency thinks about itself and its reputation. We try to integrate all these things in our practice.

**Q.** *Branding has become a marketing buzzword. How useful do you find it?*

**A.** I don't think it works for professional services. You can guarantee that Coca-Cola will always be the same, but you can't guarantee that you will always deliver professional services the same way. What you can do is talk about your organization's reputation, your commitment to provide reliable service.

**Q.** *Principle number 18 in your book is "Control spin." What's the secret?*

**A.** Controlling spin refers to the way that you deal with the media. I always tell my clients that it's not the problem itself but how you handle the problem that will be remembered. People don't realize that they're in control of what they say to the media. You don't have to tell them everything. But you do have to be careful about correcting misperceptions. You're not just dealing with traditional reporters anymore. The writers of blogs are far less predictable. Controlling spin will be even harder in the future.

**Q.** *What do you tell your clients about making presentations?*

**A.** I tell them that the unmemorable presentations are those that don't matter to the audience. They don't persuade. They don't make their point. And they don't make it clear what is so important—in the case of a planning presentation, how it will make a better community.

Ruth Knack, AICP

Knack is the executive editor of *Planning*.