



Speak up for yourself

CAROLE SPIERS explains how to keep your audience engaged by perfecting your presentation skills

WHETHER YOU'RE AN independent consultant, or employed, you need to be aware as a sales professional that your public performance is critically evaluated by your client, your customer, your peer group, and your boss. And in challenging times like these, selling yourself has never been as important as it is now – presentations are key, but how do you get them right?

To succeed you must cultivate the art of public speaking, which is in essence a branch of show business. As a motivational speaker, I make a point of employing techniques used regularly by professional speakers and actors, such as controlling nerves and breathing, utilising body language, and repeating familiar lines as though they have never been spoken before.

FORGET YOUR FEARS

If you're nervous about speaking in public, you are not alone. In fact, it's actually the most common phobia of them all, and good actors who suffer from 'stage fright' just have to try and work around it. It's important to realise firstly that this type of fear is irrational, like the fear of having an injection – of

dreading something that doesn't really hurt, but you imagine the worst. It can be rooted in a web of insecurities about the impact of your face, voice and manner on an audience, insecurities that are almost certainly exaggerated, and usually not confirmed when it comes to the actual event. You must be determined to overcome your fears.

Ruthlessly train yourself out of all hesitancy, and avoid all those 'er um, y'know' intervals that betray a lack of confidence. If you show fear, you're finished. So get into fighting mode and nobody in that audience will ever guess you were afraid of public speaking.

THE FIRST MOMENTS

When presenting, initial impact is everything.

Remember that less than 10% of your audience's attention will focus on the actual content of your presentation. The remaining 90% will be spent assessing your face, your voice, your hair, and your clothes, searching for a mass of other hidden clues about who you are and where you're coming from. Young female newscasters always complain about how their clothes and make-up seem to attract more attention than the wars and revolutions they describe.

So, appearance is an important part of the image you present to the world, whether consciously or not. But there are myriad other signals that will register with your audience before you've had a chance to utter a word.

These 'non-verbal interventions', as they are called, should be aimed at exuding confidence, making each person in the audience feel you are addressing them personally. Start by looking around with a welcoming smile, and then repeat this gesture periodically, paying equal attention to all zones of the room.

Don't be ruled by your Powerpoint presentation, it's there to complement your delivery, not be the focal point of it. Don't put too much copy on a slide, avoid reading the bullet points and don't turn your back to your audience.

SHOW YOU MEAN IT

Your credibility is dependent on you being able to speak 'from the heart', conveying a sincerity that carries total conviction. This skill needs a great deal of practice, because you will be repeating many familiar lines as though they have never been spoken before. But this is what actors do all the time, it is the essence of professional stagecraft. And even when you do start speaking, remember that, as with appearance, the sound of your voice, your accent and the pace of your delivery could end up registering more deeply than the actual content of your presentation.

BODY TALK

Throughout your presentation, keep your hands open – this is an engaging position that 'draws in' and involves the audience. Don't put your hands in your pockets as it looks casual and might suggest you don't really care what the audience feels.

MOTIVATE AND ENGAGE

The climax is key. You need your presentation to inspire your audience to take action, so make sure you 'pack a punch' with the key learning points that will bring it to an end. Get it right by using the techniques I've outlined and your presentation could end up having major implications for future business.



Contributor

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