



Jim Endicott

It takes guts to change, but the payoff can be handsome

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Longtime readers who check my picture this month will notice something is a little different — OK, a lot different. I finally got up the courage to shave my mustache. Maybe you're thinking, No big deal. But for a guy, this sort of thing can be traumatic. Once you get started, there's no turning back.

Change is never easy. I talk to presenters around the country all the time, and what they tell me is that meaningful change is tough for them too — even when they know that their presentations and delivery skills could use some improvement. Sure, we'll pick up a new CD of clip art, or take a quick PowerPoint class, but we never really get any better. We still end up throwing material together and delivering it haphazardly, telling ourselves that "good

enough" will have to do.

But it really *isn't* good enough. Being able to distill our thoughts and ideas into a crisp business presentation and deliver it to our peers or key customers is critical if we want to advance in corporate America. Look at those who are fast-tracking through your company (other than relatives of

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the owner), and you'll see something they all have in common — the ability to communicate.

"Being able to effectively present, inspire and negotiate is the No. 1 factor in career advancement," says Michael Harrington, who, as president of Harrington & Associates, Portland, Ore., has coached the brightest and the best in sports, entertainment and business. "Strong presentation skills and personal presence are the key."

How can you fast-track your presentation skills? Take a hard look at yourself, decide today's the day to make a change, and read on.

1 Getting up to bat

Many of us simply don't get enough chances to practice our presentation skills. We get to that important client meeting, and we choke — or, at best, we feel estranged from our audience. You may be wondering if you have the right stuff to be a great presenter, but it helps to remember that great presenters are made, not born. What if the Miami Dolphins allowed Dan Marino to play only one game every three months, or if Celine Dion sang only one concert a year? They'd choke, too.

One of life's little ironies is that the education that supposedly prepares us for the business world all but ignores one of its most vital skills. From high school to college to graduate school, most of us learned precious little about the art of presenting. Occasionally we'd have to present a term paper or a project to the class, but this was regarded as a necessary evil. So, if you're serious about developing your presentation skills, it means making a conscious effort to improve, and practicing every chance you get.

Now, I know this sounds about as much fun as looking for broken glass to walk over barefoot, but I mean it: *Look for additional opportunities to present.* Maybe you can volunteer to do a new-employee orientation, or ask the local chamber of commerce about leading a seminar, or sign up to give a talk at a trade show — but present you must. Don't have time? We seem to find the time for other types of personal development, so what's the real issue? Maybe it's time for a little honesty.



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2 Assessing our progress

When it comes to presentation coaching, some of the best advice is free — your audiences' and peers'. When I worked for a high-tech company, I struck a deal with one of my fellow managers: We agreed to provide each other with feedback every time we presented, and we stuck with that commitment for several years. The experience was priceless. Once, John came up to me after what I thought was a particularly good presentation and offered his congratulations, then asked, "Did you happen to have some change in your pocket?" I had been fiddling with the coins in my pants pocket throughout the entire presentation. This was an embarrassing realization, to say the least (who knows what the audience thought I was up to?), but I was extremely grateful. Now, before I present, I always move my change to a back pocket. That's one mistake I won't make again.

A relationship like this one requires you to trust your friend and graciously accept his or her feedback. You also have to be honest with your partner. It's natural to want to mask things that make you uncomfortable, but you simply will never get better unless you learn the truth, and tell it.

There are other ways to assess your performance as a presenter. The brave among you should ask your audience for formalized feedback, which likely will be more objective than even the most truthful friend's. Audiences tell it like it is — in fact, some relish the opportunity. Participants in one of my recent seminars told me my voice was too much of a monotone; I didn't have enough inflection. I'd always considered my voice an asset in presenting (in a past life, I did voice-over work), but now I know that listening to a deeper voice for a long time can be tough for an audience. So now I try to vary my intonation a bit, which seems to be working.

I've also read the comments from the Presentations '99 show back in February, and some of

you — you know who you are — will be glad to hear that I've cut way back on the jungle noises that helped set the stage for my "Presentation Survival Skills" workshop. I still think it was a cute idea, but clearly it ran amok. Lesson learned.

A word of caution, though: Reading evaluations is an art in itself. I try to look at audience feedback as though I'm judging a high-dive competition. I throw out the really low score (the guy who includes me in his general hatred of the entire conference) and the very high ones (aw, Mom, you shouldn't have come!). Instead, I look for recurring themes and thoughtful written commentary. Here are a few of the questions I look to answer in these feedback forms:

■ **Was I able to personally connect with the audience?** (Focus: My introduction and topic transitions. Did my listeners relate what I was telling them to their own experiences?)

■ **Were my graphics easy to understand, and were they supported by my spoken presentation?** (Focus: My template design, use of animation to build concepts, and effectiveness in balancing text and graphics. How well did I use less to say more?)

■ **How well did I tell my story?** (Focus: My passion for the message, my eye contact, my use of interesting anecdotes. Did I adjust my message for my audience?)

3 Pushing your creative limits

It's a cliché, but it's true:

Audiences pay a lot less attention to *what* you say than to *how* you say it. Your personal delivery style really matters. But using text and supporting graphics is also essential to your success as a presenter. Unfortunately, most presenters evolve their skills in this area only to an elementary level. There, the creative process abruptly ends.

Why do so many of us bail out at this crucial stage of learning? Three reasons:

■ **You believe that, somehow, a good presenter can overwhelm bad images.** You can't. Instead, you give the audience mixed mes-

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sages you spend your presentation struggling to overcome.

■ **You don't have the time or skills to do a good job.** Sorry, that won't fly. If you or a team member can't pick up the basic skills, you could hire a professional presentation designer. Find a designer who does the kind of work you need, and leverage those efforts yourself as you go ahead. (And no, acquiring those skills isn't a matter of buying the most expensive presentation software. I've seen spendy programs produce some pretty lame presentations, and I've seen the most basic software produce works of presentation genius.)

■ **You simply don't believe good presentation skills are important.** This is perhaps the saddest of all positions. Been overlooked for a promotion lately? You can't blame it on lack of experience forever.

Developing yourself as a presenter is an investment that pays off personally and professionally. I'm guessing that, however good your intentions have been over the years, you may be long overdue to take some initiative to improve your presentations. And remember, just because the face in the mirror is familiar doesn't mean that a little change isn't a good thing. ■

We want to hear from you

Creativity in presentations takes many forms these days, from well-crafted presentation graphics that tell a compelling story, to more effective use of software tools, to turning adversity into opportunity. One thing's for sure: It looks a little different for each of us.

What types of "creative techniques" information would be of most value to you? What creative ideas could you put to use right away? Go to www.presentations.com/creative to send your questions and ideas. We look forward to hearing from you.