

The Art and Science of Business Presentations by Dr Simon Raybould of Curved Vision

In some ways, the time when you're setting up your business is just like any other point in the life-cycle: what you want to do is concentrate upon your 'core' activity (making widgets) but what you've got to do is spend half your time on irrelevant fripperies (selling widgets).

Once your company is up and running you'll be dealing with actual widgets; up until that point you'll be selling the just the idea of the widget factory... that means you'll be making presentations in a big way.

Like it or not, at some point you'll be doing at least a couple off this list:

- competitive pitches to Venture Capitalists or Business Angels
- presentations to bank managers
- meetings with business partners (or potential business partners)
- selling the concept to organisations such as Business Link
- doing a one-minute 'elevator pitch' at networking meetings
- talking to colleagues, superiors and subordinates.

The good news is that you can safely ignore many of the adverts: you don't have to **“be an outstanding speaker!”** or **“give awesome presentations”** or even be good a presentations to get your business, so you'll just need to be **good enough** at it.

The words are carefully chosen there - you don't need to be "good", just "good enough". That's a useful thing to remember because it makes the job of training yourself that much easier.

So the story so far is that you've got to make presentations but that they're not as difficult as you might suppose - we're not looking for great orators here, just people with enough about them for the audience (think of whoever you're talking to as an audience and you won't go far wrong) to get the picture.

So, time to present ...

It's likely that when you're making some kind of pitch for your business you're likely to be nervous. I know I always am. When you're under stress, the body has a set of physiological responses designed to deal with the emergency: it's called the "**fight or flight syndrome**" and you've probably heard of it. It's very good at what it does, but unfortunately 'what it does' is designed to work in a much more primitive environment than today's business environment – it's orientated around situations where you were literally going to have to fight for your life or run away. One of the things your body does is start to use your upper chest for breathing with, in order to get oxygen into your lungs faster, which is great for fighting but no good for talking.

To talk you need to try and remember to use your diaphragm to breathe in (and therefore breathe out). The diaphragm is the big sheath of muscle underneath your lungs and above your stomach area. If you can use that when you're making your pitch lots of good things will happen.

The first, and most important is that your voice will firm up. It might go deeper, but it might not. Generally though, what it will do is sound richer and fuller - in short, you'll sound more interesting and more credible. When you're making a pitch, credibility is important.

The second thing it will do is begin to calm your nerves. This is because there's a part of your brain that is fooled into thinking that, because you're breathing like there's no threat, there really *is* no threat. The consequence is that your body chemistry is altered towards a relaxed, almost sleepy state. Don't worry about becoming too drowsy, there's no chance of that (because of the adrenaline running around your system), but it should make your whole voice and demeanor a lot more relaxed and confident.

The third thing that will happen is that you'll actually have more stamina and a better oxygen flow over the longer term. That in turn means that you'll be more tuned in to what's going on around you: basically, you're likely to start responding faster to your situation – your audience's

interest, their attention, their feedback (from body language), their questions, their energy levels.....

Moving up the body...

Moving up from your lungs, the next part of your "**speaking system**" is your throat. This is where the actual sounds of your voice are made, as airflows between your vocal folds. Again, when your body is under stress, you'll probably react like the vast majority of the population and tense up your shoulders and your throat. That's bad. This constricts your throat and stops the vibrations of your voice being made so easily - or so well. The consequence is that horrible "nervous voice" sound that everyone has heard (coming from other people as well as themselves, usually).

The solution is pretty straight-forward. Breathing from your diaphragm is going to help but you'll need also to make sure that your shoulders, head and body are positioned in the right relationship to each other.

If your neck (and hence your throat) is twisted you're reducing the amount of vibration your vocal folds can achieve, so make sure that you're facing forwards when you speak. If that means you've got to turn slightly, in order to face whoever you're talking to, then do so. What's more, once we're stressed we all have an instinct to tip our heads back - to raise our eyes - but once again this constricts the throat and makes your voice sound thinner and less mature. It's important to make sure that you're not tipping back: it'll probably feel awkward and difficult at first because most people are accustomed to raising their head too far, but once you've got the hang of it you should find it becomes second nature.

The balance point for your head that you're looking for is the position where your head is resting on your neck in as "effort free" way as it can possibly be. Stand for a few minutes checking out your head position, making a conscious note of how much effort you're putting into holding it in one particular position compared to others. I want to give you a word of warning here - be careful not to get confused between the position in which you're actually doing the minimum amount of work and

the position where it feels like you're doing the minimum; this position is almost certainly related to having become habituated to standing in a certain way, and so your muscles are used to doing that particular amount of work.

Keep at it - little and often - because it's quite a subtle thing.

Make sure that while you're doing this a few other things are also taken care of. For a start, make a point of remembering to breathe: you'd be amazed at the number of people who concentrate so hard on the position of their heads that they hold their breath. Secondly, drop your shoulders. Now drop them again, because almost no one drops them fully the first time: make very sure that no tension creeps back into them (or your arms, or your hands) while you're working. Don't *assume* that you're relaxed, check. Thirdly, make sure your breathing is from your diaphragm, not your upper chest. (I actually put my hands on my diaphragm and my chest to make sure when I'm doing this.)

Lastly, relax the muscles of your bottom. It's impossible to relax your body if your bottom is tight. It might make you feel like you're slouching, but it's worth it in terms of how much better you'll sound.

Time to be a little mouthy...

The last part of your "talking system" I want to mention here is where the sounds you make in your throat are converted into words - your mouth.

The key thing to remember is to warm up your muscles here. Almost everyone lets these muscles atrophy a little, and under-uses them. What you think of as you doing an over-the-top impression of the Queen of England is probably just good, clear speaking to someone else. Make very sure that your lips are working very hard as you talk.

The key to warming them up, by the way, is a simple one. There are lots of exercises I give people to get them doing this when I'm giving courses and classes, but the key things to do are to yawn and to rub your face.

When you yawn make sure it's not a polite, behind-the-hand, stifled thing. I'm talking about the kind of thing your cat does that looks like it's going to dislocate it's jaw. (This has the added advantage, by the way, of clearing out build-ups of carbon dioxide from the lower parts of your lungs and thus making you feel more awake.) When you rub your face, use the same kind of motion you use when you're giving yourself a vigorous wash in the morning. The area to cover is the area of your beard (if you're a man) or the area where you would be rubbing a beard if you had one (if you're a woman).

Pay particular attention to the top lip. This isn't particularly because it needs more warming up than the other parts but simply because it's very easily overlooked as people put their hands to their faces.

Put all this together and you should have a much, much better chance of making your pitch sounding cool, collected, mature, credible and relaxed. You never know, you might even end up enjoying it!

And the visual stuff...

The things that go with how you sound are pretty straight-forward, common sense type things. The basic rule is to be ever so slightly more formal than you need to be (how formal you "need" to be is taken here as meaning "as the other person expects you to be"). Don't over do it - and tend towards the conservative.

Things to avoid are gimmicks such as dangly ear-rings, picture ties, plunge neck-lines and so on. The focus of what you're trying to do is get your audience listening to what you're saying, not seeing how far up your skirt they can see (consciously or sub-consciously) or watching the flashes from your gold watch as it catches the light or whatever.

Patterns are generally a no-no.

Colours are a matter of personal style but a few tips to bear in mind are that black looks severe and robust (but few people suit it) while red is generally interpreted as a physical colour; blue as an intellectual one and green as a balancing one (and few people suit green either!).

Golden-yellow is often interpreted as a power colour. One combination I particularly favour when I'm making a pitch therefore is: black trousers, mid-blue (corporate) shirt and a rich, deep yellow tie.

And that's it!

I've simplified and skipped things, but you should have got a reasonable idea about the basics from this article. If so, I'm pleased; why not drop me a line and say so. If you've not got anything out of it, why not drop me a line in any case and I'll try and help. Enquiries should be to me by email at sme@curved-vision.co.uk

Above all, remember that your voice is unique to you and that the most important thing is to have fun. No one will be as critical of you as you are of yourself, ever, so just enjoy!