

ANDY CRAIG & DAVE YEWMAN

weekend language

PRESENTING

with **MORE STORIES** *and*

LESS POWERPOINT

For the leading providers of mission-critical, best of breed, scalable, seamless solutions that optimize, monetize and operationalize robust businesses.

Contents

suspend
powerpoint

tell a story.

organize your
narrative

remember
mehrabian

you must
prepare

At 9:15 a.m. on a typical day of presentation coaching, we were seated in the conference room at a small but successful software company in Austin, Texas.

Our video camera was fixed on a company executive and our *venti* Americanos from Starbucks were piping hot.

I walked a member of the executive team who wanted to improve his presentation skills. Let's call him Jim. A whip-smart technologist, Jim's job was to make some pretty complex and abstract pricing software sound simple, meaningful, and, well, less boring.

After exchanging pleasantries with Jim, we turned on the video camera and said what we always say: "Shut the laptop, close PowerPoint, stand up, and give us the first ten minutes of your presentation. Just the words."

Jim dug his heels straight into the dirt. You see, he wanted to walk us through his thirty-minute PowerPoint presentation—the one he delivers around the world to customers, prospects, partners, and computer science students.

Against our better judgment and against precedent, we relented.

That thirty-minute presentation turned into forty-five minutes. With more than sixty PowerPoint slides on Jim's laptop, how could it not have gone long? Worse still, the slide tsunami drew out more than three hundred "um-ah" stammers. Three hundred! We counted with chicken scratches in our notebooks.

Driving home, we couldn't recall a single thing Jim said. But we couldn't get the three hundred "um-ahs" out of our minds. There's good reason for it.

In the 1970s, University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) Professor Dr. Albert Mehrabian posed a question about the impact of body language and nonverbal communication: When we hear someone speak about feelings and attitudes, what do we believe most? Is it what they say, how they say it, or what we see?

The results were decisive. Ninety-three percent of what we believe has nothing to do with the words coming out of a speaker's mouth. Visuals accounted for 55 percent, vocals accounted for 38 percent, and verbal accounted for 7 percent. In Mehrabian's research people tended to believe the expression they saw, not the words spoken.

Decades later, this study is still used to illustrate the importance of factors other than words alone when trying to interpret meaning from a communicator, such as body language, facial expressions, hand gestures, and tone.

Does this mean you should mime your next stand-up presentation? Of course not. It means you need to focus even more on the words you're using.

What we've found time and again when training corporate executives for speeches is that if you get the verbal part right, the vocals and visuals of communication will follow. Said another way, the words—that smallest 7 percent in Mehrabian's study—are the trigger point, the driving force for every other aspect of a stand-up presentation.

And that's why this book focuses, first and foremost, on getting to the point, passing the "So what? Who cares?" test, and telling stories. If you master these concepts, you'll have much more performance energy, and your nonverbal and vocal communications will pop to your benefit.

So what? Who cares?

After all, it's what happens when we're at our best as public speakers. And when is that? On the weekends.

Weekend Language

Think about it: on weekends, we're all great communicators because our default is storytelling. When we go to a party on Saturday night, we don't talk about how we optimized our calendar last Wednesday to monetize our mission-critical, best-of-breed,

seamless-solution-provider business. (If you do, that's probably why you haven't been invited back to many parties).

Instead we tell a story about something that happened on Wednesday. On the weekends our speech is conversational, simple, clear, and interesting. We speak in examples, anecdotes, and analogies.

And what does our audience do with those stories? They engage. They ask questions. They laugh along. And then they walk across the room and say to their friends, neighbors, husbands, and wives, "Hey, you should hear what happened to Heidi last week. This is classic." That's the portable, sticky communication Chip and Dan Heath talked about in their bestseller, *Made to Stick*. Nothing "sticks" like a good story.

But then Monday morning hits. We step into the office and downshift into product feature lists and ten-point plans (that no one cares about) full of jargon, "high-level" terms, non-words, and nonsense.

And to punctuate this meaningless language, we beat the snot out of our audiences with 118-slide PowerPoint presentations chock-full of twelve bullet-pointed sentences per slide. Text is shrunk to ten-point fonts to make sure we can squeeze it all in. And if we're feeling particularly frisky, we might even zoom in some clip art. This approach is generally called "Show Up and Throw Up" and leads to "Death by PowerPoint"—that syndrome affecting audience members who have to sit through 118 slides without any discernible point; that speech where people walk outside and think, "*Well, that's an hour of my life that I'll never get back.*"

Show Up & Throw Up *leads to* Death by PowerPoint.

Audience members typically don't remember anything from those types of presentations. But they do remember stories.

Stories are the superglue of verbal communication and a staple of weekend language. The Heaths call stories the stickiest, most memorable, most portable form of communication. It sounds simple

because it is, but it's what separates meaningful, memorable communication from the pointless and forgettable PowerPoint-driven corporate blather we spew in the boardroom and during sales pitches Monday through Friday.

The approach and techniques found in this book are designed to help you replicate your existing strengths as a weekend storyteller so you can drag them into your weekday presentations to and conversations with customers, partners, employees, and investors.

In fact, we've put them to good use over the years as executive presentation and storytelling coaches at Google, adidas, Dell, Microsoft, Ingram Micro, OpenText, CA Technologies, Petrobras, Zurich Global Life Insurance, Bazaarvoice, Rackspace, Expedia, eHarmony, eBay, CBS, T-Mobile, Cook Medical, Sony, and many more.

In summary, our counsel at these top-flight companies boils down to one simple acronym:



We prescribe this approach daily to C-level executives, salespeople, marketers, developers, engineers, and human resources personnel. And while it's not rocket science, it makes them all better presenters. It did for Jim.

Ten days after his 300 "um-ah" disaster, Jim rocked our world with version two of his presentation. He had new confidence, a clear message, told stories with the necessary details, and spoke slide-free for ten minutes. But more important was what he didn't have. Those three hundred verbal tics were gone. And that's because he

had focused on his words first—using weekend language to describe his weekday work.

S.T.O.R.Y. Methodology: Five Steps to Kick-Ass Presentations

1 Suspend PowerPoint: Oh, unclench your butt-cheeks; we're just asking you to ban it for the next thirty days, not forever. We wouldn't ask you to do it if it weren't absolutely necessary. It is. People who create their slides before developing their verbal narrative are just asking for trouble. The results are predictable: dense slides, low energy, "um-ah" verbal tics, and bored audiences. Basically, a lot of slide-heavy speeches mean forgettable presentations and a total waste of time. From this day forward, slides will be the last things you create, not the first. That'll mean fewer slides and less crap on each slide.

2 Tell A Story: Don Hewitt, the hard-charging founder of CBS's *60 Minutes*, once explained the secret to his show's success this way: "It's four little words: tell me a story. That's all we do, tell them a story." It sounds simple because it is. Clear, compelling, and memorable presenters tell stories. They illustrate the business value they provide through analogies, anecdotes, and examples. And a great story will deliver all the key messages you hope to get across without ever having to utter those boring, meaningless, all-about-you, mission-statement-like key messages you have written on a whiteboard back in your office or on a plaque in the lobby.

3 Organize Your Narrative: No offense, but your presentation's not about you. It's about your audience. You have something they want—products, services, information. But unless you communicate what's in it for them, you're dead in the water. What is your major message? If the audience spontaneously combusted after the first twenty seconds of your speech (go with it), what message would you have imparted? Does it pass the "So what? Who cares?" test? Can it overcome the built-in cynicism of your

target audience (frequently coupled with the attention span of texting teens)?

4 Remember Mehrabian: When it comes to making an impact in a presentation, delivery can mean as much as content. The famous study by Dr. Albert Mehrabian shows that vocal and nonverbal communication can account for as much as 93 percent of message understanding in certain circumstances. Consider a presenter's vocal inflection. The strategic use of pauses. Body language. Verbal pacing. Hand gestures and eye contact. Where you, the presenter, stand in relation to the audience. Great presenters work to remove distractions while emphasizing authentic characteristics. Bad presenters ignore Mehrabian at their peril.

5 You Must Prepare: This really isn't complicated. You prepare, you get better. You don't, and you won't. You can't fake this; you can't wing it. Great presenters practice obsessively because it makes a difference. In the same way a software company might beta-test its software before taking it to market, you should beta-test your language—out loud—before using it with your internal and external audiences. But don't stop at practicing out loud; take the next step and videotape your run-through. In fact, record it and then watch it with a critical eye on your nonverbal behavior and a critical ear on the speed of your speech, the use of dramatic pauses, and the inflection in your words.

You know how some speakers at the beginning of a presentation will say something like, "If you remember nothing else, remember this" and then drop a big message on the audience? Well, here's our attempt at that in this book.

If you remember nothing else about communications from this book, remember this: good speakers tell great stories. Often they do nothing else. The best speeches are sometimes five or six stories linked by a common thread or theme.

People remember and repeat stories. In fact, if you tell more stories, use less PowerPoint slides, and practice out loud, you'll be the best speaker at your company.

So how exactly do you get to that place? Read on...

1

**suspend
powerpoint**

Want better presentations? Ban the use of PowerPoint over the next thirty days in your business, association, nonprofit, or school.

It'll be painful, but it will make everyone in your organization better presenters.

In his superb biography of Apple founder Steve Jobs, Walter Isaacson interviewed Jobs around forty times, often on long walks around his neighborhood. When it came to PowerPoint, Jobs was unequivocal, "I hate the way people use slide presentations instead of thinking...People who know what they're talking about don't need PowerPoint."

Without the crutch of PowerPoint, presenters will have to think through each point they're trying to make—the way they verbally illustrate it and the visuals they use to reinforce it.

If nothing else, it will serve as a needed breather for your audiences. And, boy, do they need a breather.

There are thirty million PowerPoint presentations delivered every single day around the world. A shocking abuse. What's worse is that the statistic is from a 2008 Microsoft report, and the abuse has only gotten worse since then.

Thirty million PowerPoints.

Every day.

And 90 percent of them suck.

The real issue we have with PowerPoint is not that presenters use it, but how they use it. And it's far too easy to blame Microsoft. As much as we respect the work of Yale Professor Edward Tufte, we differ on this point.

We've attended Tufte's one-day course, "Presenting Data and Information." It reinforced his reputation as a master of presenting data and analytics. But when the subject turned to PowerPoint, he went off. On Microsoft.

He placed the blame for bad PowerPoint presentations squarely on the shoulders of the Microsoft marketers who created ready-made PowerPoint templates. But, to us, that's like blaming AT&T because you drunk-dialed your ex at 3:00 a.m.

When we raised the issue during session "office hours," he shut us down, saying we were "arguing causality." We may spend the next ten years trying to decipher his point, but here's our point: no one—and we mean no one—puts a gun to your head and says you've got to manufacture slides with a dozen bullet-pointed sentences apiece on them. Or with spreadsheets on them. Or with the clouds, bubbles, and arrows that comprise high-tech flowcharts. Or the like.

Why do so many smart people deliver such stupid presentations?

That's lazy. That's bad communication. And that's your fault. Not Microsoft's. Yours.

Make Them Think, Not Work

Why do so many smart people deliver such stupid presentations?

Here's why: presentations in the corporate world are created backwards.

Tell us if what follows sounds familiar. You're assigned a date for a presentation to customers, partners, employees, analysts, industry peers—whomever. You probably follow one of three paths:

1 You e-mail your marketing department for a suitable PowerPoint presentation you can use with this group. After reviewing the slides, you think about how you're going to talk to each one.

2 You search your company's network for relevant decks you could smash together into a new presentation (the path our software exec, Jim, had initially taken). After the great mash-up, you think about the verbal connective tissue.

3 You nobly set forth to create a set of slides specifically for this particular audience. Only then do you consider what you're actually going to say.

All three paths are dead ends—roads to a presentation wasteland where audiences don't understand or care about what you're saying, and where none of what you say sticks after the fact.

That's because you prepared backwards.

And it really hurts you on presentation day, with content that isn't meaningful to the audience, presenters who aren't clear or compelling, and messages that aren't memorable when the audience walks out the door. It's not only the length and content of the presentation but also the delivery that suffers. Incoherent content is what draws out those "ums" and "ahs" and other distracting nonverbal tics.

The bad news is that the elimination of PowerPoint for thirty days will make your job of creating meaningful, memorable presentations much harder. You'll have to prepare more and prepare longer. The good news is on the day of the presentation, all that work will make it easier for your audience to understand your message.

That's a good thing. You can and should make your audience think about your point of view, what you do and how you do it, your products and services, or your approach to solving a problem. But don't ever make them work to figure out what it is you're trying to say. That's your job.

Think about how much work it takes the audience to decode the standard crappy slide deck. We often can't tell the difference between most PowerPoint slides and most Word documents. And while the PowerPoint might be easier for you to develop, it's a lot harder for your audience to understand.

At a certain point, your audience will stop working at it. Audiences today have the attention span of texting fifteen-year-olds so when you've prepped backward and you're not ready, your audience checks out.

That's when the prospect in the back row pulls out her iPhone and checks her e-mail. And it's all because you took the easy path, the

24%

WOULD GIVE
UP SEX
THAT EVENING

21%

SAID THEY'D
RATHER DO
THEIR TAXES

20%

WOULD PREFER
A VISIT TO THE
DENTIST

18%

WOULD VOLUNTEER
TO WORK ON
SATURDAY INSTEAD

24% of respondents said they would give up sex that evening! (*Does that tell you how much people hate bad PowerPoint presentations?*)

This is our audience. Your audience. And they're screaming for something different, so much so that they're willing to remain celibate and do their taxes on a weekend while having a root canal. Wow.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words. Even in 6:40.

Presenters at the Technology, Entertainment, Design conference, or TED, typically get this right. They recognize that they, not the PowerPoint, are the presentation. They are comfortable with being in the spotlight on center stage. Most understand that a simple prop—like a human brain or a wheelbarrow full of sugar—is a much more engaging visual than a slide.

You are the presentation, not your slides.

But when they do employ PowerPoint or Apple's Keynote, they typically use pictures, a statistic, or one word to illustrate their verbal narratives. They keep it simple. Garr Reynolds, who writes a terrific blog we love, *Presentation Zen* (presentationzen.com), offers one practical application: use the three-second rule.

Good presentation designers try to keep their visuals so simple that the audience can absorb them in three seconds and then turn their attention back to the presenter for context or further meaning.

It reinforces the point we just made: you are the presentation, not your slides.

This evolution from slideware overload to imagery won't be easy. You can either take baby steps, or you can rip the Band-Aid right off.

After all, desperate times call for desperate measures. In this day of "Death by PowerPoint," it's time for something radical, something almost crazy, something that goes completely against the grain of corporate presentations: PechaKucha (pecha-kucha.org).

It's a Japanese term that means "chitchat" or "chatter." But what it could mean for your organization is a much more efficient use of your time.

It's not about the speaker. It's about the audience.

In February 2003, Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham, two architects based in Tokyo, had had enough of long-assed presentations with tons of text-littered slides, so they set out to create a new approach to presentations. What they dreamed up was sheer brilliance.

PechaKucha is a technique that forces speakers to present in quick, efficient bursts of just six minutes and forty seconds.

The idea is helped by a feature in Microsoft's PowerPoint software that allows each slide to automatically advance—in PechaKucha's case, after twenty seconds. So each speaker at a PechaKucha event gets twenty slides, and each slide advances after twenty seconds on

screen. So the total presentation time for a speaker is 6:40. And you're done.

Genius.

Now think about that approach for a minute. Think about all those seemingly endless corporate presentations you've endured over the years. Think about the bad slides. Think about the boring content. Now think about the wasted time and cost.

You don't need PowerPoint to deliver an effective presentation.

Dave Paradi, coauthor of *Guide to PowerPoint*, did. He estimated that those thirty million PowerPoint presentations made each day could add up to \$252 million—or the estimated worth of 2008 and 2012 US Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney:

“If we assume some relatively conservative meeting parameters of four people per presentation, a half-hour presentation on average and the wasted time due to a poor presentation is one-quarter of the presentation time, we arrive at a waste of fifteen million person-hours per day. At an average salary of \$35,000 per year for those attending the meeting, the cost of that wasted time is a staggering \$252 million and change each day.”

All that money. All that time. All those slides. What if you took the PechaKucha approach instead? Using that approach, twelve executives would all be done speaking in less than two hours.

The audiences would love it. The speakers might hate it (they'd feel like they needed more time; they'd feel “naked” without eighty-seven slides; they'd be intimidated).

But it's not about the speakers. It's about the audience.

PechaKucha has been described as “the love child of PowerPoint and Twitter,” and what it takes aim at is the overall bloat, the

intellectual laziness, the awful slides, and the lack of preparation that are all so rampant in the corporate world.

It's radical, almost crazy, and completely against the status quo of atypical corporate presentations.

But it could just be the best thing to ever happen to your organization's meeting and speaking culture.

The reality is you don't need PowerPoint to deliver an effective presentation. (That thud you just heard was a Microsoft PowerPoint product manager's jaw hitting the ground outside of Seattle.)

Really, it's completely legal to deliver a presentation without using PowerPoint. Honest, we looked it up. (We didn't look it up).

Bill Gates was one of the worst presenters in the corporate world for over thirty years. You know it. I know it. Chances are good that even he knew it.

It's no wonder. Just look at a few snapshots of the kind of PowerPoint slides he tried to present. Heck, even Presidents Clinton and Reagan—both legends for giving powerful, compelling speeches—would lose energy, authenticity, and interest trying to present slides like those.

But did you see Gates present at TED in February 2009? Among other things, he described how the costs associated with treating malaria crush the economies in the cities and countries where the disease is an epidemic. That is, of course, on top of the human toll.

To illustrate this point, he released a jarful of real, live mosquitos six minutes into his presentation. Mosquitos, of course, are well known for spreading malaria.

The audience gasped, and then laughed nervously. It's rumored that eBay founder Pierre Omidyar was so jarred by the stunt that he stood up from his front-row seat and walked to the back of the room. His Tweet validates the rumor:



@pierre
Pierre Omidyar

That's it, I'm not sitting up front anymore. #TED

4 Feb 09 via txt

Then, after a slight pause and with a big cheesy smile, Gates reassured his audience that those mosquitos were not infected. He had them—the audience, not the mosquitos—in the palm of his hand. It was more energy and enthusiasm than most audiences had ever seen from the Microsoft founder.

It would have been negligent—and possibly criminal—to deliver the point about malaria, mosquitos, and the need for vaccines with a PowerPoint full of bullets, bar charts, and technical bubbles. Gates did use PowerPoint slides that day, but the slide accompanying his mosquito stunt was a huge color photo of a mosquito landing on someone's arm. He adhered to Garr Reynolds' three-second rule.

In stark contrast to Gates, Glenn Bennett, the chief operating officer of adidas, is a terrific speaker. One day in 2004 we sat in a room with Glenn, who was getting ready to fly to China for one of his internal “town hall meetings” with his global operations team.

“I don't want to just show up with slides and do the ‘blah, blah, blah,’” Glenn said, sitting at one end of a giant conference table. “That's what we always do, and people tune it out.”

The content Glenn was preparing was essentially a call to action, a message to his team that the next six months were going to be tough sledding, and he needed them to knuckle down and execute.

But before that, Glenn needed to do his homework.

After some thought and some discussion, we filled several big Post-it Notes with potential talking points, and Glenn started to talk out a rough draft of his speech. We videotaped his ramblings, and a few minutes into his third or fourth time on camera, we found a simple message—and quickly figured out a simple delivery methodology.

Glenn was going to nix slides completely. Instead he'd have a flip chart in the room. When he opened his speech, he would walk up to the flip chart, draw a big circle in the middle, and write one or two words inside it—his major messages.

Then he'd walk into the audience—putting himself physically close to them in order to deliver the call to action. He needed them to be focused; he needed to look them in the eyes from close up—not from a podium on a stage—and he needed to hammer home a few key messages.

Ban projectors and laptops from staff meetings.

But imagine a few weeks after the speech. How would the audience members remember exactly what Glenn said? Would they know what to do, specifically what actions to take? Even rousing calls to action can be somewhat abstract (like the football coach who yells, “I want you to be the best you can be. All right, let's go!”)

Abstraction is the enemy in communications. Great communicators break things down so there is absolutely no ambiguity about what they want the audience to do, think, or feel. So Glenn, who's almost obsessive about preparation and practice, is at the town hall meeting being held in China's Guangdong Province just north of Hong Kong. He's got the flip chart thing going and his speech is roughly thirty-five minutes old. Then he stops.

“Reach under your chairs,” he told the operations team assembled in the room, “there's an envelope taped to the bottom. Open it.”

You can imagine dozens of audience members ripping open envelopes. In the envelopes were laminated books containing specific targets, margins, and metrics for the team—all stuff that global operations geeks just love.

“These are your metrics,” Glenn told the audience members. “And I'm coming back here in six months. We're going to sit in this room, and I'm going to hold each of you accountable for the things in this book.”

Now could you do that? Could you ditch PowerPoint slides? Reduce your message so it fits inside a few circles drawn on a flip chart? Use something unexpected like the book taped under the chairs to hammer home the details?

Of course you could. You just need to do your homework.

Your Homework

Outlaw PowerPoint for thirty days. Company-wide. Oh, unclench your butt cheeks; we're not talking forever, just thirty days.

Force your employees to develop their narratives first. Turn that approach into muscle memory. Then, and only then, reintroduce PowerPoint as a "potential" tool they can use to visually illustrate their major messages.

How do you do that, exactly? Easy, you ban projectors and laptops from meetings; you encourage your staffers to come to meetings prepared to just speak rather than rely on a crutch called PowerPoint; you remove the norm that says a presenter has to have forty-eight slides to be considered properly prepared to speak.

If you have to present during this time, you figure out your key point and you build a speech around that single word or goal or phrase. You focus on your "talk track" and think specifically about what you want your audience to do after they finish listening to your presentation.

And you outlaw PowerPoint for thirty days. You can do it.

So that's your homework.

Day 31: Three Bonus PowerPoint Tips

You've read this far and you deserve a reward. Here are three specific tips to employ if you decide to use PowerPoint slides after your thirty-day embargo:

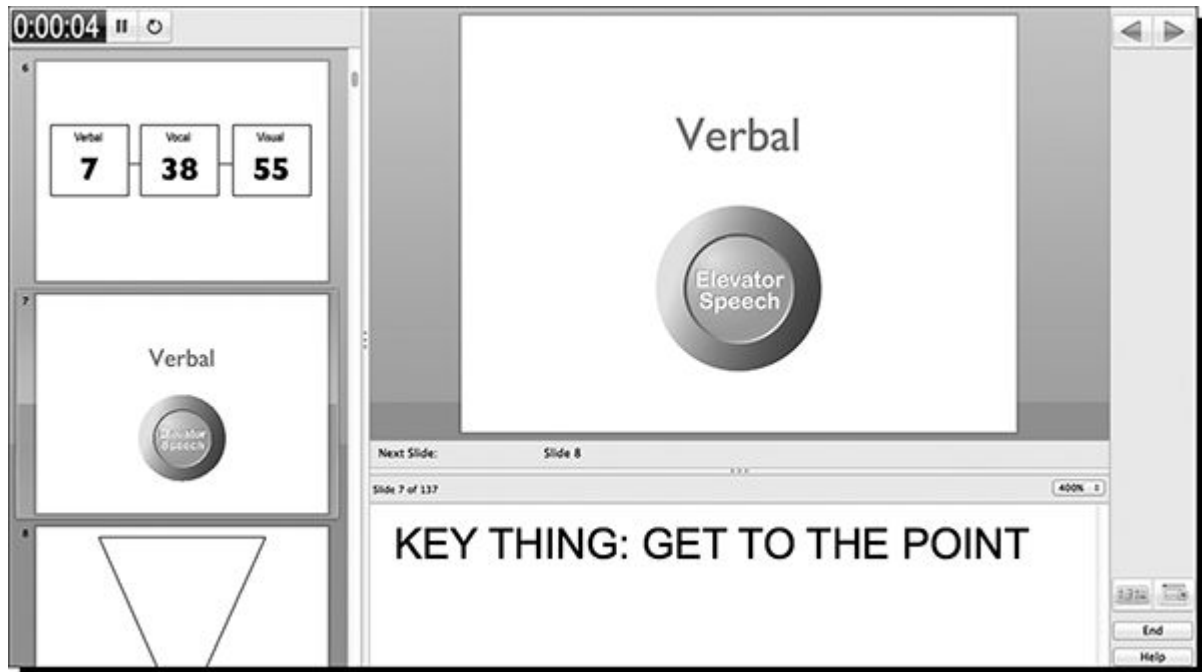
- 1 Use the B key.** Launch PowerPoint or Keynote and go into the presentation mode—where the slide fills your entire screen and that of the projector to which you're connected. Now hit the B key. What happened? Your screen went blank, didn't it? Now hit the B key again and it'll come back. Cool, huh?

It's amazing how many people aren't familiar with this one simple trick. If you're speaking and someone asks a question or you want to go off topic for a bit, just tap the B key, blank the screen, deal with the question or the topic, then tap the B key again and you're back in your flow.

2 Hide busy slides. It's often the case that your slide deck is also your handout for people who didn't attend your presentation—or perhaps it's going to be e-mailed to your entire company so there's a legitimate reason to have slides containing lots of information. Go into the “slide sorter” view in your slide deck and find a busy, detailed slide. Now right click with your computer's mouse. You'll see an option to “Hide Slide.” Click on that and when you're in presentation mode the slide will not appear.

What this means is that you can include text-heavy slides in your deck but you don't have to use them when speaking. You can think of this as a way to build twenty good, clean, simple slides for presenting, and forty busy, detailed slides that are basically an appendix—necessary information but the kind of data dump that would put an audience to sleep in seconds.

3 Use presenter mode. Newer versions of PowerPoint and Keynote enable you to project one slide to an audience but also have a “cheat sheet” of sorts on your desktop. For example, take a peek at the following slide.



The big slide is the one that shows up on the projection screen—what the audience sees. The entirety is what you see on your computer. With just a quick glance at your laptop on the conference room table you can see the next slide and your core message for the slide currently projected, plus you have a clock so you can see how much time you have left.

These tips are incredibly useful and, again, you'd be amazed at how many people don't take advantage of them when presenting with slides.

2

tell a story

Comedian Dennis Miller once ranted, “As it turns out, adult life is just tall grade school.”

Miller was highlighting our ageless tendencies toward immaturity, but we think it’s a poetic verse that every corporate executive should have needlepointed on their office rugs before they’re ever allowed to present again. Because when it comes to clear, compelling, and memorable presentations, sales pitches, technology demonstrations, or employee meetings, stories make all the difference.

If you think storytelling sounds too simplistic for the corporate world—that it’s child’s play—think again. Storytelling works, especially at work. And it’s catching on with startups and grown-up companies all around the world. That was the case with one enormous technology company based just outside Seattle.

Early in 2007 the company recognized the need to pump up its storytelling capabilities across its ninety-thousand-person business. Since then, more than forty-five hundred of its marketers, salespeople, developers, and executives from around the world have taken a storytelling workshop based on the bestseller *Made to Stick*.

As one learning and development leader likes to say,

“Storytelling is a muscle. And it’s one that we don’t exercise nearly enough.”

It’s important for all presenters to exercise that muscle more often because storytelling brings clarity to your company vision, your products and services, and your reason for being. That clarity is the first step of commerce.

And that’s nothing to kid about.

Stories Deliver Messages

During one storytelling workshop, a software manager in the back of a large meeting room raised his hand. His question: “Why do we

“speak like idiots?”

After the laughter subsided, we told him what we tell everyone, “Not sure, but we appreciate you providing us with job security.”

Truth is, your audience hates key message-speak.

Contemporary communication is filled with jargon, words that don't exist in any dictionary, and a common, almost tribal urge to try to communicate in a form of corporate Klingon. You know, that abstract, esoteric, and indecipherable language we think sounds smart and “high-level” but is really only understood by other Klingons.

It's the kind of nonsense most companies have written in their key message documents that get e-mailed to all employees for use in customer meetings, public presentations, and media interviews. And it makes everyone in the boardroom or the brainstorm feel really good.

The ability to tell a story fades away in business settings.

Problem is, it leaves your audience nauseated.

No one outside of your four walls cares about “leading providers of end-to-end, mission-critical, seamless, scalable solutions that optimize stuff.”

Your audience cares about themselves. What do they get by working with you? How will it help their lives and businesses? Has anyone else benefited from what you do or how you do it?

The best way to answer these questions is through storytelling. And a great story will deliver all those key messages you want without sounding like key message-speak.

For example, in 2003, we ran a storytelling workshop for a Portland, Oregon-based janitorial services company. It made liquid cleaners that schools, hospitals, and bus depots use to wash their floors and countertops. A team of about two hundred executives and salespeople spent hours talking about the company's “sustainable earth” products and sustainability emphasis in research and development. We couldn't have cared less. Frankly, it didn't mean anything to us. This was 2003, and sustainability wasn't a household

word. Even today, we would have no idea how its “sustainability” efforts were any different from GE’s or Dell’s or one of its chief competitors because every company talks in glowing terms about its sustainability program.

(Note to self: If you’re in a commodity industry and you’re using commodity language such as “sustainability,” then what makes you any different from anyone else? If that difference isn’t abundantly clear to customers, then you are sentencing your salespeople to price-based competition.)

So we ran a contest in the room—giving each table of ten a half hour to come up with the single best story that illustrated the environmental safety and quality of its cleaning products.

The spokesperson for the second-to-last table said this:

“Before we take a new cleaning product to market, we take a goldfish and drop it in a bucket of that product. If the goldfish swims, we know those chemicals are safe enough to seep into the earth. In fact, you could drink a glass of it and be just fine. We’ve done it before.

“However, if the goldfish dies, we know we’ve got a massive quality control issue on our hands, and we have to go back to the drawing board. That’s what sustainability means to us.”

Shazam!

Now that’s a concrete, vivid, and compelling illustration of an incredibly abstract concept such as sustainability. That’s a memorable story. We literally don’t remember anything else that was said that day, but we’ll never forget the goldfish story.

And think of the visual you could use to support this story. It would be a mistake to use anything other than a goldfish in a fish bowl—or

a picture of that—to visually illustrate it.

Good communication isn't rocket science. We're all natural storytellers but that ability often fades away when we are in business settings.

During one recent presentation coaching session at a web hosting and cloud services company, a skeptic challenged his colleague's attempt at storytelling for an internal audience.

“I totally see how this would work for external audiences. But I think it'd be awkward if you told a story like that at an internal meeting.” Before we could chime in, two others jumped to the presenter's defense. “I disagree. It would really stand out,” they countered. “It would be so different from the way we normally do it that it would be refreshing and more memorable.”

That's the point. As the Heaths tell us in *Made to Stick*, stories are passed down from generation to generation and are the oldest and stickiest forms of communication. Stories are the fundamental building blocks of effective communication.

We frankly can't understand why you wouldn't search for an appropriate story to include in your next presentation. And your next. And your next.

You'll have plenty of options when you do.

Examples

Examples are the lingua franca of presentations. They illustrate broad business strategies. Use them early and use them often.

When it comes to making people care, you have to get granular. It's not enough to say your company has saved its customers millions of dollars, even though it may be true. But if you say your company saved Acme Inc. \$18 million in four years due entirely to your product, you will have their attention. When you have an audience whose attention span is measured in nanoseconds, you've got to be as concrete as possible.

Back in 2006, web content management company Vignette (now part of OpenText) was preparing for a road show. The once high-flying company was now trying to rebuild its post-bubble business and reputation. During prep sessions for customer, partner, media, and analyst presentations, company executives told us all about the scalability of its solutions.

Yawn.

Every software provider claims to have scalable software. You need to illustrate that scalability to rise above the messaging sameness, build credibility, and strike a connection with companies that might need scalability (if they can first figure out what the hell it means).

We threw down the challenge: “What’s the best example of your software’s scalability? Where was it? For whom? When was it? How scalable? Prove it.”

One executive got medieval (a little *Pulp Fiction* homage for fans). Leo Brunnick, senior vice president of products and marketing, dispatched two marketers to check the case studies and call salespeople, account managers, and even customers. After weeks of research and hours of practice, Leo rocked this story:

“NASA is one of our clients that we’ve been working with for years. NASA had an opportunity to host the single largest online event in world history. They sent the ‘Deep Impact Probe’ into space to intentionally collide with a comet. They wanted to explore the comet and do some research. That’s pretty cool stuff. And NASA said, ‘Let’s invite the world to come and watch.’

“You see, NASA has a business model that requires the support of the public. So by getting the support of the public, they get more funding. It’s critical for them to inspire the public. So they said, ‘World, come watch this project,’ and the world came. On the morning of July 4, 2005, a quarter of a billion people simultaneously watched online while this NASA Deep Impact Probe collided with the comet. An

absolutely huge event. It actually exceeded the largest online event before it, which was the inaugural Victoria's Secret fashion show, which a lot of people remember because it crashed the servers and took down the Internet while it was trying to go on.

“This was an even larger event that NASA was trying to serve. That many people. And the content: one billion images, one billion pages served up to the public during the event. And it didn't go down. You can just imagine if NASA were to invite the world to come watch, and out in the living room there's Grandpa with a little kid on his knee saying, 'Look, you're about to see something that no one's ever seen before,' and he gets a '404. Page Not Found' error because the site can't handle that traffic. That wouldn't be good for NASA. So it's at that moment when the business absolutely, fundamentally has to depend on the scale of our solutions.”

He told that story in one minute thirty-six seconds. And while it's a nice short story, he didn't sacrifice the details, and it illustrates the heck out of that word “scalability.”

Look at all we know about this project. All those nitty-gritty details. It's really tough to find the “gory” details, but don't settle for less. Don't settle for the abstract. Because for a message to be memorable, it needs concrete details.

Concrete details add color and credibility to your messages.

Would you remember the company DriveSavers if we just told you that they can recover data from hard drives pretty well? Probably not. But what if we told you they pulled all the data off a PC that'd been in a 1,700-degree fire? Or that they'd saved twelve Simpsons' episodes—and probably producer Bill Oakley's job—by finding them

on a crashed hard drive? Story details matter a great deal. Those details and that color also add credibility to your messages.

Anecdotes

These anecdotes might be the most underused form of communication in corporate presentations—yet the most available. You talk to more customers, partners, developers, and market watchers in one week than we can fathom.

What did one of them say? Where were you? What happened? Who were the characters? Make us feel like we were there.

Anecdotes get a bad rap. Corporate executives tend to view them as irrelevant or childish. Same with stories, metaphors, and analogies—all the stuff of communications excellence. They toss them away and substitute corporate-speak full of jargon and acronyms.

It makes us crazy because anecdotes really work. Consider the following political example.

It was the last week of the 2012 US presidential campaign. In his closing pitch to voters—and a plea to continue working and calling to get out the vote on election day—President Barack Obama took an Iowa audience back in time to the 2007–2008 Democratic primary contest for the party nomination:

“It was early in the...primaries; we were still way down in the polls. And at the time I was still competing in South Carolina. It was one of the early primary states, and I really wanted the endorsement of the state representative down there. I’d met her at some function where nobody knew me, nobody could pronounce my name. They’re wondering, ‘What’s he thinking?’ So I asked her for an endorsement, and she said, ‘I tell you what, Obama. I will give you my endorsement if you come to my hometown of Greenwood, South Carolina.’ And I think I had a little bit of wine during dinner because right away I said, ‘OK.’ So it’s about a month later, and I’m traveling back to South Carolina. We

flew in late at night; we'd been campaigning nonstop. We land in South Carolina, at around midnight. We get to the hotel about one o'clock in the morning, and I am wiped out. I am exhausted. I'm dragging my bags to my room...and just as I'm about to walk into my room, one of my staff taps me on the shoulder and says, 'Excuse me, Senator. We're going to have to wake up and be on the road at 6:30 in the morning.' And I said, 'What?! Why?'

Anecdotes really work.

'Well you made this promise to go to Greenwood, and it's several hours away.' I try to keep my promises so a few hours later I wake up, and I'm feeling terrible. I think a cold is coming on, and I open up the curtains to get some light to wake me up but it's pouring down rain...terrible storm. And I take a shower, get some coffee, and I open up the newspaper and there's a bad story about me in the New York Times. I was much more sensitive at that time to bad stories...I've become accustomed to these now. And finally I get dressed. I go downstairs. I'm walking out to the car, and my umbrella blows open, and I'm soaked. So by the time I'm in the car, I'm wet, and I'm mad, and I'm still kind of sleepy. It turns out that Greenwood is several hours away from everywhere else. So we drive, and we drive, and we drive. Finally we get to Greenwood...although you don't know you're in Greenwood right away because there are not a lot of tall buildings around. We pull up to a small field house. And I walk in, I look around, and I don't hear a lot going on. The state representative said she was going to organize a little meeting for us, and we walk in and there were about twenty people there. They're all kind of wet too, and they don't look very excited to see me. But I'm running

for president, and I do what I'm supposed to do. I'm shaking hands, and saying, 'How do you do? Nice to meet you.'

'I'm making my way around the room and suddenly I hear this voice cry out behind me, 'Fired up?' And I'm startled. I don't know what's going on. But everybody in the room—this is a small room—they act like this is normal. And when the voice says, 'Fired up?' they say, 'Ready to go!' And so once again I hear the voice, 'Fired up?' They say, 'Fired up!' It says, 'Ready to go?' They say, 'Ready to go!'

'I look around. I turn behind me, and there's this small woman. She's about sixty years old. It looks like she just came from church...she's got a big church hat. And she's looking at me...kind of peering at me. And she's grinning, smiling, looking happy. Turns out she's a city councilwoman from Greenwood who also moonlights as a private detective. I'm not making this up; this is true. And it turns out she's famous throughout the area. When she goes to football games, and when she goes to rallies and goes to public events throughout the area, she does this chant of hers. She does it wherever she goes. So for the next few minutes she just keeps on saying it, 'Fired up? Ready to go?' And I'm thinking...this woman is showing me up. This is my meeting. I'm running for president, and she's dominating the room. I look at my staff, and they just shrug their shoulders. They don't know what to do. This goes on for a few minutes.'

'Here's the thing, Iowa: after a few minutes, I'm feeling kind of fired up. I'm feeling like I'm ready to go. So I start joining in the chant; my staff starts joining in the chant. Suddenly I feel pretty good. And we go on to talk about the lives of the people in the room...their families and their struggles, their hopes for their kids and grandkids. We drive out, and it's still raining but it doesn't seem so bad. For the rest of day, even after we left Greenwood, even though we still weren't

getting any big crowds anyplace, even though people still couldn't pronounce my name, I felt good. And I'd see my staff, and I'd say, 'Are you fired up?' They'd say, 'We're fired up!' I'd say, 'Are you ready to go?' They'd say, 'We're ready to go.' We brought that to Iowa, and during rallies this became a chant. The woman, her name is Edith Childs, she became a celebrity. She was written up in the Wall Street Journal, and folks did news stories on her. This became one of the anthems of our campaign back in 2008.

'Now here's the end of the story. We knew we were coming back to Des Moines for the last campaign rally I'll ever do for me. We were getting kind of sentimental, so we called up Edith Childs. 'Why don't you come on up. We'll fly you up from South Carolina, and you can do this chant...one more time for good old sake.' It's like getting the band back together again. And you know what Edith said? She said, 'I'd love to see you, but I think we can still win North Carolina, so I'm taking a crew into North Carolina to knock on doors on election day. I don't have time just to be talking about it; I've got to knock on some doors. I've got to turn out the vote. I'm still fired up, but I've got work to do.'

'And that shows you what one voice can do. One voice can change a room. And if it can change a room, it can change a city. And if it can change a city, it can change a state. And if it can change a state, it can change a nation. And if it can change a nation, it can change the world. And Iowa, in 2008, your voice changed the world. And Edith Childs asked me to ask you if you're willing to stand with me tomorrow? If you're willing to take your friends and your neighbors and your coworkers to the polls tomorrow? If you're willing to make sure we finish what we started, she's pretty sure we'll win Iowa. She's pretty sure we'll win this election. She had just one question for you and that is: 'Are you fired up?!''

Companies overlook the power of these kinds of anecdotes. For example, one of our clients makes athletic apparel that's really light—featherweight shoes, shorts, and shirts. As part of product testing, the company brings in small groups of athletes to get feedback.

Now a lot of companies use focus groups and most of them don't think about the compelling anecdotes that such groups can yield. When a high school basketball team came to look at the company's latest gear, one sixteen-year-old sophomore walked over to the table where shorts were laid out. He picked them up and was amazed by how light they were (roughly four ounces). He turned to the company sales rep and said, "These are the shit. Where do I buy these?"

Now the company could have talked forever about its manufacturing process and its choice of materials and stitching. But that single comment from a sixteen-year-old speaks volumes about how light its products are for playing hoops.

It's just one anecdote. But it works for us.

Analogies

We simply love analogies or metaphors. They lead to real light bulb moments of clarity and understanding. Done right, they give you a colorful, quotable, Tweetable, memorable nutshell description of your company, product, or service. Just ask Ginger Bunte, former CFO of Golfsmith.

Analogies are universal.

In 2003, Golfsmith was a company in transition. After a great deal of success in its first thirty-six years, a new management team set out on an aggressive plan to shift the company's identity and focus—internally and externally—from a golf club components catalogue to a "leading multichannel golf retailer."

Like most companies, Golfsmith's clear and compelling narrative was there but buried in, and spread out among, the conversations of numerous company executives. This was a pretty scary realization for a company that was suddenly answering to bondholders and the

SEC as a public debt company. So, we put the CEO, CFO, and fourteen other executives on camera to listen to their business goals and strategy, dig beneath the jargon (e.g., “multichannel retailer”), and uncover the colorful and compelling language that best described the new Golfsmith. The result was something special:

“We’re a candy store for golfers. And we’re expanding aggressively across the US with the goal of building The Home Depot, Best Buy, or Barnes & Noble of the \$6 billion golf retail industry.

“Our forty-six activity-based stores offer twenty-six million golfers the same kind of experience that Barnes & Noble has for book shoppers or Starbucks has for coffee drinkers. Golfsmith’s stores are playgrounds where customers can take golf lessons from a PGA pro...learn to build their own golf clubs from scratch...get custom fitted with the latest technology...or use the newest club to launch monster drives on the eighteenth hole of Pebble Beach in our computerized golf simulators.

“That’s probably why our average customer spends forty-five minutes to an hour per visit in our stores, and why we sell more Callaway and Cleveland golf products than any retailer.”

The simple process resulted in a killer message for customers, investors, employees, business partners, and reporters. For example, here’s how a few articles described the company after the new language had been implemented:

GOLFSMITH'S COURSE OF ACTION

Golfsmith's retail stores are worth a visit, even if you don't golf. Some of their stores are veritable edutainment centers that could be B-school examples of how to establish an experiential retail environment. No kidding, they're like golf playgrounds.

Catalog Success Magazine, August 2004, cover story

TAKING A SHOT AT LEADING THE PACK

Jim Thompson wants his company to become the Barnes & Noble or the Best Buy of golf.

Bergen Record,
October 5, 2004

GOLFSMITH'S COURSE OF ACTION

Golfsmith has signed partnerships with various golf-related services that have, in turn, set up shop within Golfsmith stores—as Starbucks has in bookstores.

Catalog Success Magazine,
August 2004, cover story

You know it's sticky messaging when it's repeated almost verbatim by reporters. And "candy store for golfers" became the opening sentence of the company's first annual report.

We've been delivering storytelling workshops based on Chip and Dan Heath's *Made to Stick* book for several years. The Heaths call analogies "high-concept pitches." What that means is taking something people already know and essentially playing it forward. For example, "*Die Hard* on a bus" is how the movie *Speed* was pitched to Hollywood executives.

We were delivering a *Made to Stick* workshop at a technology company's office in New Delhi a few years back. Before the session, we'd been concerned that a lot of our stories and information were

American, and we wondered aloud if they would translate while we were several thousand miles away.

During the workshop we put “*Die Hard* on a bus” up on our slides and asked, “What movie is that?” Almost everyone in the room said *Speed* and smiled.

Turns out analogies are universal in scope.

The Backstory

Open any magazine or watch any news program on television and you’re likely to see a backstory, usually something that helps develop the main story, like the Olympic skater who grew up poor but is poised to win gold. We love the stories behind the stories, but people don’t tell them. Here are two old examples and one new one:

In 1856 a new dean named Henry Liddell arrived at Christ Church College at Oxford University in England. Liddell and his wife, Lorina, had three young daughters, and the family befriended a tall, gangly, twenty-four-year-old mathematics professor named Charles Dodgson.

When he was a small child, Dodgson caught a fever that left him deaf in one ear. At seventeen he suffered from whooping cough, which led to a weak chest, and he also stammered badly. After Liddell’s arrival, Dodgson became especially close to the three girls, Edith, Lorina Charlotte, and Alice, and used to take them on rowing trips along the River Thames near Oxford.

It was on one of those rowboat trips on July 4, 1862, that Dodgson invented a story to tell the girls. In his diary, he remembered the day had a “cloudless blue above, the watery mirror below, the boat drifting idly on its way, the tinkle of the drops that fell from the oars...” After Dodgson told the story, one of the girls, Alice, begged him to write it down for her. After some delay, Dodgson eventually put pen to paper, and he gave a handwritten, illustrated book to Alice in November 1864.

The story was called “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” and Dodgson is far better known by his pen name, Lewis Carroll. The book became one of the most popular children’s books in the world. Dodgson became so popular, in fact, that after reading Alice in

Wonderland, Queen Victoria suggested that he dedicate his next book to her, which he did.

And that's the backstory of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland."

Around the same time Charles Dodgson was writing stories for Alice and her sisters, a Swedish inventor was reading his own obituary in a French newspaper. And it wasn't a very kind obituary, saying, in part, "*Le marchand de la mort est mort*" ("The merchant of death is dead"). It also said, "Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday."

Now Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, was still very much alive. His brother, Ludvig, had died, and the newspaper had made a horrible mistake. So not only had he lost a brother, he now knew how he would be remembered. The premature obituary apparently had a huge impact on Nobel. And on November 27, 1895, Nobel in his last will and testament assigned the bulk of his considerable fortune to establishing five Nobel Prizes to be awarded annually in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, and peace (economics was added in 1969). When Nobel did die, in 1896, he left a fortune of 33 million krona—or around \$9 million—to endow the Nobel prizes.

Backstories are the color commentators of stories.

When Nobel invented dynamite, he naively thought it would be a force for peace, saying, "On the day that two army corps can mutually annihilate each other in a second, all civilized nations will surely recoil with horror and disband their troops." Nobel died around twenty years before World War I, which is probably just as well when you think about it.

And that's the backstory of the Nobel Prize.

People love the stories behind the stories.

Dodgson's ailments led to a classic children's story; Nobel almost choking on his espresso while reading his obituary led to the Nobel Prizes. Backstories add context and understanding. They're the color commentators of stories. They can be powerful and engaging—in literature and business.

One fall afternoon in Seattle, we were working with a senior executive at an enormous technology company; let's call him Tom. He's a great guy and a fabulous speaker, but it was early in the presentation coaching process, and Tom was busy and a bit distracted.

We were preparing to announce one of the company's brand-new products, a huge touch screen computer—something dozens of people can touch simultaneously to share photos or play games, and now something that several years later is the brains of numerous tablet computers.

"What is this?" we asked Tom gesturing to the coffee-table sized product sitting in front of him.

"It's a rich, seamless new computing paradigm," Tom replied on camera.

So do you understand what the product is from that explanation? Are you rushing out to plunk down dollars to buy one? A paradigm shift! Wow.

No, us neither.

But the throwaway backstory about the product was there all along; it was just hidden beneath all that corporate nonsense.

Turns out the product was developed by a couple of company engineers in one of their garages back in 2001. The engineers worked on other hardware during the day, but on evenings and weekends they tinkered with what became the huge touch screen.

The company has almost ninety thousand employees in more than 160 countries; it's the furthest thing from a startup, but the product was quite literally developed in a garage by two engineers who already had day jobs.

Personal stories are another way to light a torch under your audience.

It gets even better. When it was time to show an early prototype to the CEO, the engineers drove to a nearby IKEA store and bought a wooden coffee table. Using a circular saw they cut a hole in the top of the table and built the first prototype by duct-taping a flat panel display to the coffee table, positioning five cameras underneath the display, and then, very cautiously, they drove the entire contraption to the CEO's office.

The CEO, who's not easily impressed, loved the prototype and gave the two engineers \$2 million to build a real prototype.

Now that's a true story. And yet a whip-smart guy like Tom was describing the product as a "rich, seamless new computing paradigm."

We know what you're thinking: a "new computing paradigm" is exactly what it is; it's a computer you can use without a mouse or keyboard. And until recently that was pretty unusual.

No argument from us regarding what it is, but a *big* argument, a huge angry screed, an impassioned rant from us about how we frame the touch screen computer story. It's not useful to use such dry, dispassionate, nonsensical language to describe something that's actually pretty cool. Especially with such a vivid, concrete, kick-ass story sitting right in front of you.

If you have a backstory, bring it to the forefront of your next presentation because people love the stories behind the stories—even those about "rich, seamless new computing paradigms."

Personal Stories

In 1997, poet and novelist George Dawes Green launched The Moth (themoth.org) from the living room of his New York apartment. The goal was to promote "the art and craft of storytelling" in our everyday lives. Years later, thousands of storytellers have shared their dramatic and emotional personal tales with audiences in cafes and clubs. As The Moth says, "audiences are drawn to stories like a moth to a flame."

Indeed, personal stories are another way to light a torch under your audience. Just ask Eric Hansen.

Eric sold Bazaarvoice's online software to insurance companies around the world. Among other things, that Austin-based company helps businesses develop ratings and reviews on their websites. While this is a natural fit for companies such as Best Buy or Home Depot who sell tangible products, it can be a much tougher sell for companies with abstract products such as life insurance. So Eric makes it personal.

"The reason to use Bazaarvoice in your business is personal to your customers, and it's personal to me actually. My great grandfather, Maurice Smith, was a farmer in South Dakota during the Great Depression. He actually wasn't a very good farmer. He had trouble making a profit in that endeavor and out of pure necessity became a life insurance agent for Midland National Life Insurance.

'The way it worked in those days is that the home office would mail him a crate of applications. He'd load them into the back of his truck and hit the road. He'd drive off to the places he knew—the farms, feed lots, feed stores, and cafes in the surrounding area. He'd speak to the farmers personally about buying policies from him. He'd complete the applications, and he'd drive back home when they were all filled out. He'd mail them back to the home office and wait for another crate of "empties" to come back his way. He was actually very successful at this and found that he could support his family this way. Like any successful salesperson he was looking to improve his performance. One day, as he was waiting for another crate of empties to arrive from the home office, his farm's pig had a litter of piglets. This gave him an idea for a promotion. He'd offer a free piglet with the sale of a life insurance policy. So he loaded the pigs into the back of his truck—along with blank policies—and took off on his sales route. To Maurice's surprise, he couldn't give away

a single piglet. Farmers of the Great Depression viewed the piglets as an act of charity and were too proud to accept them. Maurice drove home with his crate of policies and all his piglets. If Maurice Smith had had the ability to simply ask his customers what was important to them, he would have known that the promotion was a bad idea.”

Eric—whose only visual for this presentation is a picture of his great-grandfather in an insurance sales booth—then pivots to his core message, that that’s one of the many things Bazaarvoice can do for an insurance company’s business. Its service gives you the ability to truly know what your customers want because they’re telling you all over the web—on your website, on Facebook, on Twitter, and more.

According to sources on the scene, Eric told this story to the executive team of one of the largest insurance companies in the world. After the meeting, the insurance executives were overheard recounting the “pig story.” One brainstormed that Eric could have brought in a stuffed pink pig as his prop.

Who’s presentation stood out? Eric’s, or a competitor’s with all those bullet-pointed slides? Who’s message stuck with the audience? As you consider that, consider this: Eric got the sale.

Sanity Check

- Doing what Eric did does require a leap of faith—the courage to try something different.
- And that can be scary—you might fail; it could be uncomfortable; and it’s far from the safe-but-boring slide tsunami.
 - Do it anyway.

Evergreen Option: Imagine

One word has the ability to turn everyone into great storytellers. The word is *imagine*.

Instead of tech company speakers burying audiences with text-heavy PowerPoint slides and an endless stream of jargon and acronyms (in a world where seemingly everything is “robust, scalable, integrated, best-of-breed, optimized, and monetized”), how about we tell stories that begin with the word *imagine*?

Imagine what might happen if, instead of enduring ninety minutes of indecipherable blather, an audience gets to hear a speaker tell great stories beginning with that single magic word.

This is more than a theoretical discussion. Recently we worked with a software company that’s very involved with a prominent issue: keeping companies secure online. We asked several of their sales representatives what the company did. And we got a lot of nonsense in response. The company was a “leading solution provider” that offered “visibility into compliance” and had expertise in “configuration management.”

Are you still awake?

Our heads were spinning. But after a little digging, a few pointed questions and some practice by the sales reps, a pretty decent story started to emerge. Try reading this out loud:

“Imagine you’re the head of technology for Zappos.com, the online shoe retailer that just exposed the personal info of twenty-four million users to hackers (names, e-mails, addresses, and even encrypted passwords). Yikes! Well, our software prevents just that kind of intrusion. Essentially we help big companies—banks, hospitals, retailers—be more secure and save lots of money in the process, because they can make smarter decisions about how to set up their security systems. For example...”

Now even if you’re not a technologist, you understand a few basic things about the company—and it all took less than thirty seconds. Perhaps you’ll even continue listening. Now imagine what happens to your brain if a speaker starts with, “We’re a leading solution

provider that offers configuration management and visibility into compliance for corporations.”

Uh, what happened? Did you just nod off too?

And the catalyst that sparks the revolution is one simple word:

imagine.

It's not just small technology companies that struggle with blandness. Here's how a massive non-tech company describes itself: “Our \$22 billion company creates unique time to value through a comprehensive suite of innovative solutions that help clients within the Human Age.”

Wow.

Curious? It's Manpower Group—they help people get jobs.

Manpower's pitiful pabulum won a 2011 “Guff Award” from Lucy Kellaway, a writer at the *Financial Times* and now a personal hero of ours. You can read her hysterical column at <http://tinyurl.com/WLguff>.

It's simple. Good speakers tell stories. Stories stick like glue to the minds of audience members and can start with a single magic word that will help vaccinate you against jargon and the kind of nonsensical language that muddies contemporary communications.

Imagine that.

Your Homework

Imagine your presentation. Now imagine using a story that plugs directly into the major message you want to deliver and brings that message to life. This will take some work to get right.

You see, journalists have two jobs in a newsroom: reporting and writing. If, as a reporter, you interview ten sources who give you statistics, facts, quotes, personal experiences, and examples, then you have a lot of information from which to pull. It makes writing a lot easier. If, on the other hand, you're a lazy reporter and interview only one source with very little knowledge, writing becomes nearly impossible. The point is: do the reporting for your next presentation.

Talk to people in your organization who know the details and have the knowledge.

Do the reporting.

To flesh out the details of his NASA example, Vignette's Leo Brunnick assigned two staffers to do some reporting. They read the NASA case study as a starting point; they interviewed the salesperson who sold the technology and services to NASA; they interviewed the account manager who worked directly with NASA on the Deep Impact Probe online event; they spoke with a customer at NASA to get the details right. Did this create more work? Absolutely. Did it make Vignette's presentations better? No question.

So think of your best story that illustrates your work or the point you're trying to make and go do the reporting to unpack the vivid details that make it concrete and memorable. Your presentation is all about saving money? You tell a story about an employee in your New York office who saved the company \$45,000 a year by switching off twelve computer servers before he left work every night for a year. That story acts as a springboard into the broader message: saving money.

Without a great story, you might be a weekday communicator who needs to go fishing for some weekend language.

So that's your homework.

3

**organize your
narrative**

“But don’t you want to save the best for last?”
asked a confused C-level executive mid-session.

“Absolutely not,”
we replied.

“The best content you have always—always—
goes first. Right up front.”

There’s a scientific method to this madness.

The first two minutes of any presentation are “cognitive hallowed ground.” So says Dr. John Medina, a Seattle-based neurologist and author of *The Brain Rules*.

What he means is that in those first two minutes, your audience’s eyes and ears are wide open. It’s the point at which they actually care what you have to say. They’re leaning forward and actively listening—neurologically “clicked in.” They’re a sponge for your major message. But there can be a massive drop-off after that.

The question is: What are you going to do with that first two minutes? Can you make the audience care? Think about it. If you lose the audience in those critical first two minutes, does it really matter what you say in the ensuing forty-five minutes? No. Because they’re gone. Oh, they may physically stay in the room, but mentally they checked out when you didn’t get right to the point, didn’t make it about them, and ignored the neurology of the first two minutes.

So what? Who cares?

No offense, but again, it’s not about you. It’s about your audience. You have something they want—products, services, information. But unless you communicate what’s in it for them, you’re toast.

It’s what we call the “So what? Who cares?” test. And it’s just human nature. It’s a test you apply several times a day when you’re browsing the Internet, meeting with someone, or participating in a conference call.

If the audience spontaneously combusted after the first twenty seconds of your speech, what message would you have imparted? Would your audience care? Would it be about them or mean something to them? Or would it be all about you?

Your answer to that question is what's sometimes called your "elevator speech." In a crowded and confusing market like yours, you sometimes get only one shot at setting your company, agency, or association apart from the pack—whether in a sales meeting, on stage at an industry conference keynote, or on an elevator ride. And you typically get about thirty seconds to grab your audience's attention.

So, remember, when someone asks, "What do you do?" they really don't care what you do. What they're really asking is, "What can you do for me?"

With this in mind, your message better be drop-dead simple for your audience to understand and without the need for any translation. It better clearly define what makes you different. It better be framed and articulated in a way that makes it easy to deliver across your entire team—with consistency. And it had better mean something to every team member.

For example, Austin-based software company Zilliant was wrestling with its elevator speech in 2008. Industry jargon and insider language were robbing Zilliant's messages of clarity and differentiation. Its executives—including the fifteen we put on video camera—liked to talk all about how its software "optimizes pricing in a B2B competitive bid sales environment" and the like.

Your message better be drop-dead simple.

But every company in the price-optimization software market talks about how they optimize prices. This commodity language was selling Zilliant short and making its software look and sound just like its competitors'. And it certainly didn't highlight Zilliant's ability to pinpoint the exact price their customers should demand in every single sale.

Furthermore, the lack of a tight, customer-focused elevator speech had a stranglehold on Zilliant’s executives when it came time to deliver a company presentation with impact—particularly in the opening.

That was the challenge confronting CEO Greg Peters.

“I’m not a company cheerleader,” he said, in a matter-of-fact tone. “I feel my presentations are sometimes boring. And I don’t particularly like public speaking. So you’ve got your work cut out for you.”

That’s how Peters greeted us in our first presentation prep session—three weeks before his keynote address to dozens of customers and prospects at Zilliant’s inaugural customer conference.

After weeks of on-camera interviews and hours of presentation rehearsals, Zilliant’s compelling, concise, consistent elevator speech became an asset to salespeople on customer calls and executives on the corporate stump:

“We take the guesswork out of pricing. That means we take that money your sales teams typically leave on the table in sales negotiations...and put it right back in your pocket as pure profit.

“For example, a \$30 billion global energy management company is adding \$1 million a month in pure profit to its bottom line by using our software to determine the best prices for its products and services.”

What followed were memorable analogies and customer examples that added clarity, credibility, and color. This—and a dedication to on-camera practice sessions—helped transform Peters into a comfortable and compelling storyteller who mixed analogies, examples, and anecdotes into his thirty-minute presentation.

So when Peters took the stage to address dozens of customers and prospects at Zilliant’s inaugural customer conference, he did so with a clear headline, a memorable stunt, and a powerful first thirty seconds that sounded and looked like this:

Lights dim. The O’Jays’ “For the Love of Money” booms in the room. Peters takes the stage with a duffel bag in hand. He unzips the bag and pours \$7,000 dollars in cash onto a small table. He moves to center stage, flashes a wide smile, and exclaims: “The

days of leaving money on the table are over...because we take the guesswork out of pricing.”

With a clear headline, a memorable stunt, and a powerful first thirty seconds, Peters had his audience right where he wanted them.

He was in control; the audience was far from bored.

Not bad for a self-proclaimed “boring” speaker who hates public speaking.

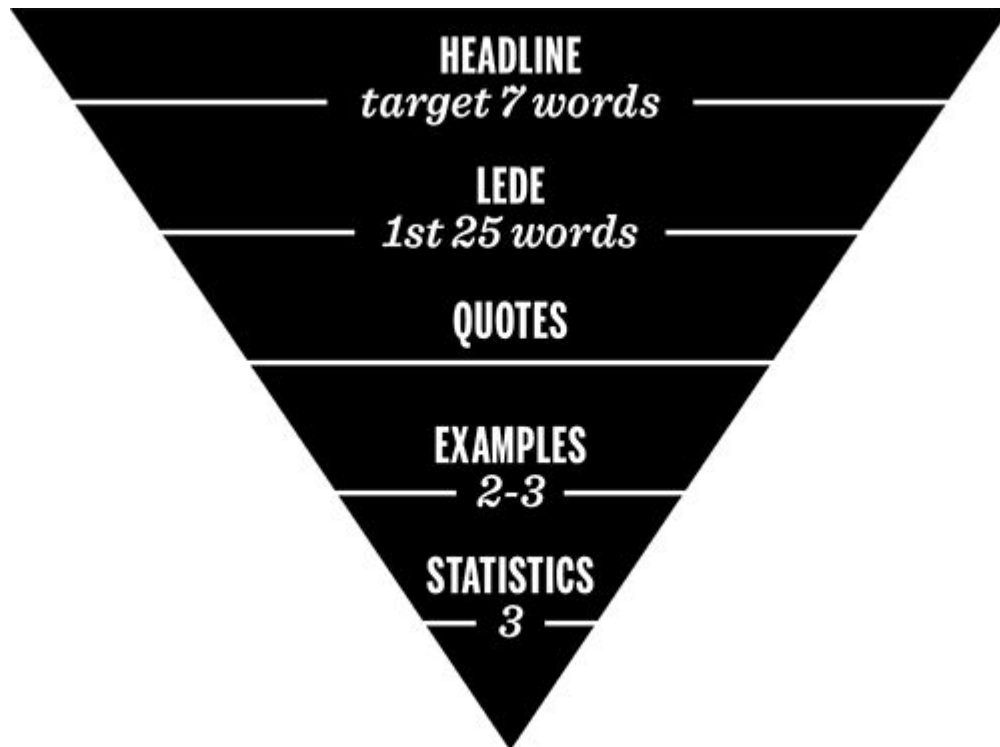
In fact, audience members ranked Peters’ presentation second highest of the three-day show. Second only to the professional, full-time guest speaker hired specifically for the conference. And many noted the “money drop” stunt.

What made Peters’ narrative so effective was the translation, among other things. Rather than leading with what his company’s technology was, he led with what it does. So in the future, try this: instead of telling your audience what your product, service, or technology is, start by telling them what it does for them. What do they get? We’ll get to you and your services and technology eventually, but you can’t start there.

Remember, it’s not about you. It’s about them. Once you nail that down, then—and only then—will you get permission to tell them how it works and what sorts of feeds and speeds it features. But you’ve got to start with them. If you don’t, you might be burying what journalists call “the lede.”

Journalism 101

We’re both journalism wonks. What you learn the first day of journalism school is that reporters are in a constant search for the “lede,” which is the first twenty-five words of the article or on-air story. It summarizes the article and includes only the most important elements of the subject matter. Basically, it tees up the rest of the story. (Side note, it’s spelled “lede” to distinguish it from “lead” back in the days of lead type in newsrooms. I know, right?)



Looking back to Journalism 101, we recommend the “inverted pyramid.” It’s the format of every news story. The concept is simple: the best, sexiest, most important information is presented first. The meaning, the nutshell—the lede—goes up top, right below the headline in the fat part of the pyramid. From there, you build out the story.

It’s too bad most executives never took Journalism 101, because far too few presenters get right to the point. It’s like CNN’s Richard Quest once said when asked about the first tip for a television story or a presentation, “You’ve got to grab ’em by the grapes.”

Humans consume information meaning first, details second.

In *The Brain Rules*, John Medina reminds us that all humans consume information the same way: meaning first, details second. So if you immediately unload all fifteen features of your cool new technology or your lifesaving drug, your audience won’t be able to

process the information. Because you haven't put it in context yet. You didn't give them the meaning first.

In 2007, a \$30 billion IT distributor was struggling with a common communication challenge: how to unite ten different divisions and dozens of services under one core message. What's the umbrella message, the one thing all of those services and divisions mean for our customers, partners, and salespeople? In short, it was in search of its lede.

The company was suffering from what *Made to Stick* calls "featuritis," in that the messages were nothing more than a list of the company assets, offerings, and features. But none of them passed the "So what? Who cares?" test.

So we put the CEO and more than a dozen executives and salespeople on camera to dig beneath the features and the jargon and uncover a clear lede and the stories to illustrate it.

Today, the company describes its core message this way: "We're the ultimate IT matchmaker. We sit at the intersection of four thousand vendors, thirty thousand resellers, and hundreds of thousands of customers. And we help them make sense of all the technology options out there and put the right pieces together to grow their businesses. For example..."

And each of those ten divisions? We replaced the corporate-speak with storytelling—examples, analogies, and anecdotes—that brings the divisions and what they do to life while clearly describing the value of each.

Try grabbing a video camera and hunting for your company's lede. Once you find it, you've got to put the rest of your content in the right order so that it flows naturally and keeps your audience engaged.

World-renowned chef Jamie Oliver put the inverted pyramid into practice at his October 2010 TED Talk, "Teach Every Child about Food." He took the stage and said, "Sadly, in the next eighteen minutes when I do our chat, four Americans that are alive will be dead through the food that they eat."

Jamie used his shocking statistic right up front to grab his audience's attention and frame his narrative—even before he introduced himself. He clearly looked at everything he had in his

arsenal and asked, “What’s the most important thing I have to say?” Then he put that in the first seconds of his presentation.

Now that’s a lede.

Sanity Check

- Do my talking points pass the “**So what? Who Cares?**” Test?
 - Do I have a clear, unmistakable headline?
 - Is my story in plain English?

In early 2008 Ingram Micro North America President Keith Bradley was preparing remarks for 400 of his senior managers who were about to converge on the company’s Southern California headquarters for a conference.

A few weeks before the event, we sat in a small meeting room and talked out the various things Keith wanted to tell his top managers. For many companies it’s not often that 400 top executives come together in one place, so the temptation is to turn a fire hose of information on them—to make sure they don’t miss anything and leave with their heads so full of data that they might just explode before they check in for their flights home. Add to that the harsh reality of a business operating in a tough economic climate—a period where grinding out the execution of a business plan was going to take guts, determination, and teamwork.

As we scribbled down various messages on the meeting room’s whiteboard it became clear that fire hose of data could easily be unloaded on those 400 people.

But we couldn’t find the lede.

Ingram is the world’s largest technology distributor, a Fortune 100, \$42 billion company with 17,000 employees in countries around the world that operates as a kind of middleman between 1,400 supplier companies and 185,000 partners who sell what they make. The company has more annual revenue than American Express, Comcast, and Coca-Cola, and runs a complicated operation, so there’s typically a lot to talk about.

But when Keith stood up to practice delivering all that information out loud, things didn't quite fly right. His "talk track" wasn't bad, but it certainly wasn't good. After an hour or so, we did what consultants do: we suggested a coffee break. As we chatted with Keith, a genial Irishman, the subject of vacations came up and we asked Keith what he did last summer. He lit up.

He'd climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, a 19,341-foot dormant volcano that's Africa's tallest peak. He'd been dreaming of conquering Kilimanjaro since he was a kid in Ireland flying over it en route to a relative's home in Africa. He talked excitedly about the team of 36 people who'd helped him and three friends reach the summit. He talked about his fear of heights and how altitude sickness had struck the team on the morning they started their ascent to the summit at 1:00 a.m. He talked about being 150 feet from the very top of the mountain and thinking that he couldn't make it, that climbing into thin air had seemingly robbed his lungs of their ability to work. And finally he talked about stepping onto the summit having counted 347 steps to travel 150 feet up at a punishing 70 degree angle. He said he just focused on the "18 inches of dirt" in front of him, took 10 steps and then did it again.

Gone was the long, detailed boring list of stuff we'd written on the whiteboard as initial talking points; gone was Keith's flat delivery of that information (Keith's a good speaker, but a combination of Bill Clinton, Steve Jobs, and Zig Ziglar couldn't have delivered that long list of blah, blah, blah with emphasis and energy).

No, Keith's summer climb was a great story, full of passion and energy. As we slurped our coffee, it seemed obvious that these crystal-clear messages could easily be used for Keith's senior managers in a few weeks: a team that gritted its teeth and ground its way to the summit, a team that had support from 36 sherpas, a team that focused on the "18 inches of dirt" in front of it and just kept going.

Keith's communications director Jennifer Anaya was smiling at the end of the coffee break. She realized what Keith, perhaps inadvertently, had delivered: the core message for his management offsite meeting—his lede, something as simple as "18 inches of dirt."

The rest of our session was spent filling in the data points of Keith's climb and baking in segues to the state of Ingram Micro's North American business. As we unpacked the details, some fabulous anecdotes came to life.

At one point on the climb up Kilimanjaro, there was a pathway that had crumbled. Peeking over the edge of the pathway, Keith and his colleagues saw the 1,000-foot drop.

"What happens if we fall here?" Keith asked a sherpa.

"You're going to die," was the curt reply.

It can be scary to keep going, but it's essential—both in climbing and in business.

During the speech Keith used a few photos of his fellow climbers, but no PowerPoint slides. He didn't need them. He knew the story, and he knew how to link it to the business and implore those 400 managers to keep focusing on that 18 inches of dirt before them and execute the business plan. As he talked about taking 347 steps over that last 150 feet to the summit, he pantomimed taking tiny steps and pausing—seemingly exhausted from the effort. In other words he knew his material so well that he was able to work on his stage presence—his performance. That's a level many presidents and CEOs never reach, but Keith did.

Keith was extremely diligent about practicing his speech. In fact, in the weeks leading up to the event, not only was he before our cameras several times, he was also on the elliptical machine at his health club with his speaking notes propped up before him. He was practicing out loud. The guy exercising next to him asked, "Who are you talking to?" "Oh, I'm practicing my speech," Keith replied.

It was at that point we knew Keith would conquer those 400 managers like he did Kilimanjaro. And he did. In fact, around Ingram Micro, it's still known as the "18 inches of dirt" speech.

Signposting

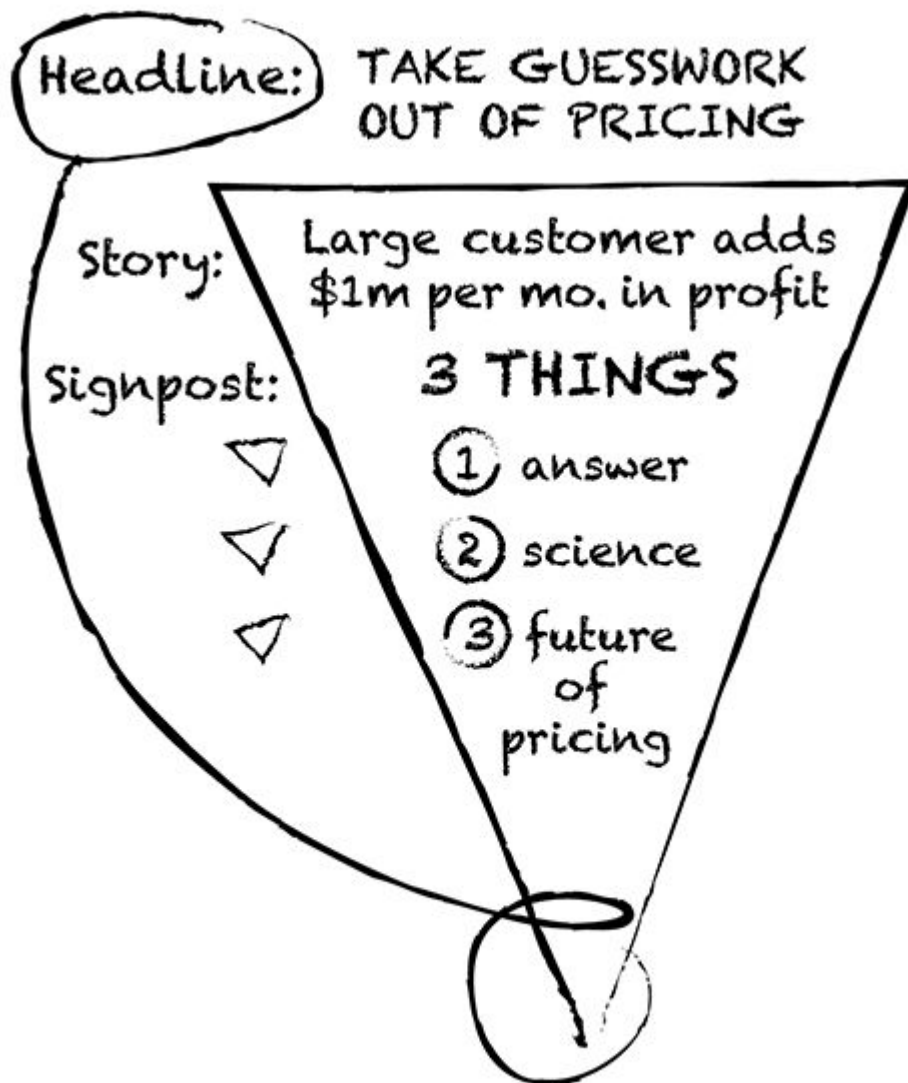
It's staggering to us how many speakers don't take advantage of a basic tool that audiences just love: signposting. When you're driving, you look at a signpost to see how far it is to the turnoff or the next

city. It's nice to know how far you have to go, right? How long it's going to take to get home or to Aunt Betty's.

Think of it this way: when you write a long e-mail or Word document, you probably use bullet points to call the readers' eyes to two or three of your most important points.

It's the same principle for master speakers. Quite often they will use a signpost—a verbal bullet point—in their presentations. It might sound something like, "In the next ten minutes I want to tell you the secret of life." Now, if that's of interest to you as an audience member, you now know not only that you're going to be privy to a big secret, but also that you're going to be sitting there for ten minutes.

For example, after the money dump, the clear opening, and a short story, Zilliant's Greg Peters turned to his audience and said, "I'm going to talk about three things today: one, I'm going to talk about 'answers'...two, I'm going to talk about 'science'...and three, I'm going to talk about 'the future of pricing.'"



Signposting gives your audience a roadmap to track your progress.

That simple style gave his audience the roadmap for the next twenty-five minutes. With his effective signposting, they always knew where they were in the presentation, and Greg would help. Each time he got to the next section, he'd call it out. "Number two," he'd say with two fingers in the air, "let's talk about 'science.'"

Guy Kawasaki, author of *The Art of the Start*, often fashions his presentations as top ten lists. If his objective is for his audience to remember all ten things, then this approach will fail. Our brains simply are not wired to absorb and recall that much information in one sitting. However, he likes to say that he uses top ten lists so that “even if I suck, you can track my progress.”

Think about it. If it's been fifteen minutes on the clock, and Kawasaki says, “Point six,” then it's a pretty safe bet we'll only be here for fifteen more minutes. At that moment a collective exhale cascades across the room. We know where we are in the talk. Contrast that with the pinhead who was assigned thirty minutes for his presentation; he's just hit forty-five minutes on the timer, and he appears to have gotten a second wind. We have no idea where we are in his talk or when it will conclude. That's when we mentally check out and dive into our e-mails or leave the room entirely.

We've all had that kind of experience. At a college commencement, we were in the audience when the commencement speaker threw in a joke, “The last thing you need on the day of your college graduation is some old guy going on for hours and hours.” And then he did just that. It made us want to stick forks in our own eyes (we resisted).

So tell the audience how long you're going to take. It's simple but effective. And here's the real secret to signposting. If you tell the audience your presentation is going to be forty-five minutes, you end in forty minutes and everyone thinks it's the best presentation of the day. Why? Because you just gave them five minutes of their lives back.

Good speakers never go long. Never, never, never, never, never. Ever.

Never.

Clear versus Dumbing Down

Your message isn't a secret, is it? So don't hide it in your own clever version of corporate Klingon. No one—and we mean no one—outside of your building cares about your “optimized processes,” “monetized solutions,” or self-anointed “leading provider” status. Get

to the heart of the matter with a description that anyone and everyone can understand.

Bono, U2 frontman and uber-ambassador to Africa, once was asked how he manages to hold his own in conversations with economists and heads of state when discussing debt relief and financial plans for Africa.

He replied, “If someone can’t explain to me very quickly what this particular theory is, I’m not coming up to the conclusion that I’m stupid and they’re smarter than me. I’m just saying, ‘You’re not very good at explaining...try it again.’”

That’s sweet music to our ears. It reminds us that one’s job as a communicator is to, well, communicate. Using jargon, fancy words, or contrived language is not the way to accomplish that goal. And don’t come back at us with the “but everybody talks that way” excuse. That’s a cop-out, and it’s dangerous. If you’re using the same words as everyone else, you’re not differentiating yourself from the competition. You’re just using commodity language to describe your commodity service.

Which brings us to two terms common in the business world that we absolutely despise: “dumbing it down” and “high level.”

There’s nothing dumb about making complex theory, technology, or business plans clear and simple to understand. That actually takes a lot more work and intelligence to pull off.

Exhibit A: Richard Feynman.

Feynman, a professor at the California Institute of Technology (aka Caltech), was a physicist who did a lot of work in quantum electrodynamics, superfluidity, and particle physics. He won the 1965 Nobel Prize in physics and worked on the Manhattan Project with J. Robert Oppenheimer to develop the atomic bomb. He also pioneered the fields of quantum computing and the concept of nanotechnology.

He was one of the smartest men to walk this planet. Know what his nickname was? The Great Explainer. Not The Great Scientist or The Great Physicist.

No, it was The Great Explainer because he could take the most advanced theories in physics and have seventeen-year-old

undergraduates leaning forward in their seats.

He had a guiding principle: “If a topic could not be explained in a freshman lecture it was not yet fully understood.”

He was truly the Steve Jobs of his field and of his time. Someone who could make it so simple and clear. And no one ever accused him of dumbing down information or science.

A few months back, a friend told us Feynman used to say that truly smart people can break down complicated concepts into something more digestible. Our friend said he’d heard that even fellow Caltech professors would sometimes sit in on Feynman’s lectures because he was so good at doing just that.

Get to the heart of the matter with a description that anyone and everyone can understand.

There’s real value in being able to talk about such things in a way that mere mortals can understand, even those who have only a passing knowledge of quantum electrodynamics or liquid helium.

That’s why Feynman was such a great example of what we like to call “low-level language.”

Frankly, most senior executives represent what could be called “anti-Feynmans.” They tend to say things like, “Oh, I don’t want to dumb it down” or “I want to keep it high level” because it’s easier to use abstractions and jargon than it is to really, truly communicate and deliver a core message with conviction and credibility.

“Dumbing it down” usually means you don’t want to do the work to make it simple and accessible for all of your audience. Like, say, using terms such as “quantum electrodynamics” without offering a clarification—a “what that means is” or an example. “Dumbing it down” is a term of arrogance and condescension to an audience that simply isn’t as smart as the speaker or writer (like, maybe, Feynman’s audiences).

Translate and illustrate high-level concepts for your audience.

The fix is simple: start with a clear, simple core message so you reach everyone in the audience. Then you can dive into complexity (remember Medina’s “meaning before details”).

And while we’re on the subject, the phrase “high level” leaves us a little pissy too. It typically leads to abstract, esoteric, and indecipherable drivel. No one would expect an audience to get the “physics of the superfluidity of supercooled liquid helium” without a clear translation or good example. “High level” typically means the speaker or writer is communicating using industry-insider language that’s extraordinarily difficult for the rest of us to understand.

Around ten years ago, we sat through an entire presentation on an arcane software protocol called “OFX.” Befuddling. We had no clue what the acronym meant or what the protocol actually did, which was a big problem because we were charged with explaining it to the company’s customers.

After the meeting we asked an experienced colleague what OFX stood for. She paused, sighed, and then said, “I have no idea. But they use it all the time.” (We subsequently found out it stood for “Open Financial Exchange.” Which makes as much sense today as it did ten years ago).

So consider this a plea for clarity, concreteness, and “low-level” communication. Translate the high-level concept into the meaning to the audience and illustrate it with stories and clear, concrete language that describes why your audience will care.

Be specific, be clear, and please, please, please make sure that you’re speaking to everyone. If it’s possible to explain quantum electrodynamics and the physics of the superfluidity of supercooled liquid helium in terms a college freshman could understand, there’s hope for all of us.

We’ve found a few phrases that will help you get on the right path.

Magic Words

The following are a few key phrases that will reveal whether you're getting to the point and telling stories. If you hear these words come out of your mouth, you're probably on your way to good communication.

“Imagine” This is the most elegant word in a presenter's arsenal. “Imagine” immediately puts the audience in the position of, well, imagining. It's a perfect way to describe how your business vision or new product or service will play out in a customer's business or life. “Imagine you're the CIO of a major bank, or maybe an IT developer. You probably care about three big things...”

“What that means is” What that means to the listener or reader is critical. It's what they care most about. Translate it so they don't have to work to figure it out.

“For example” Some companies have thousands of customers and partners. Chances are, there's an example out there that best illustrates what you do or how you do it.

“Our customers tell us” No one cares about you; they care greatly, however, about what you can do for them. This simple phrase is a great way to overcome objections or biases that hinder your point of view.

“Think of it this way” Analogies are incredibly effective yet underused in the corporate world. This phrase will put you on the path to an analogy. It's also a useful way to reframe a negative.

“What makes us different” You're in a pitched battle with your top competitors. This is no time for ambiguity. What's the one thing you do that no one else can do? Call it out very clearly.

Let's use an example. Unless you have an advanced medical degree, you probably don't know what “ablating tumors with sub-millimeter accuracy” means.

It's what the Heath brothers in *Made to Stick* would call the “Curse of Knowledge.” This curse often plagues medical professionals who

know so much about treating cancerous tumors that they've forgotten they have to explain it to mere mortals like us.

Tell us if this sounds familiar: you walk into a cell phone store. There are shiny phones and predatory salesmen everywhere. You ask one simple question, the salesman's "Curse of Knowledge" kicks into high gear, and you immediately want to run from the store and gouge out your eyes (well, at least we do).

The jargon and acronyms seem endless: 3G, 4G, LTE. It's staggering and more than a little intimidating.

Incidentally, do you know what "LTE" actually means? It's in all the cell phone commercials, and people at our telecom clients toss the term around like it's the tech equivalent of FBI, which everyone knows means "Federal Bureau of Investigation."

So, do you know?

If not, here's the answer: LTE stands for "Long Term Evolution."

So now you know. But you probably still don't care. We sure don't. That's the "Curse of Knowledge" at work.

Don't use confusing acronyms.

Made to Stick reminds us that we always need to be conscious of the curse. But the executives at one of our medical industry clients evidently hadn't read the book, because when we first asked them, "What does your company do?" as one they said, "We make a laser that ablates tumors with sub-millimeter accuracy."

"Oh," we responded. "That's nice." But we were crying on the inside, Feynman was spinning in his grave, and anyone who had to contend with such indecipherable nonsensical language would surely be ready to kill or seriously maim.

So what exactly does "ablating tumors with sub-millimeter accuracy" mean?

Let's back up quite a few steps.

Imagine you have a lung tumor, imagine it's pretty big, and imagine you're eighty-five years old. Your list of treatment options

just got a lot shorter. You won't survive invasive cancer surgery, so what do you do?

That's where the laser can help. It's a massive robotic arm—sort of looks like a dentist's chair on steroids—but instead of a light on the arm, it has a laser beam.

That laser beam contains a dose of radiation that can be up to one hundred times higher than comparable treatment methods. And the reason it can shoot such high doses of radiation into your lung tumor is that it's incredibly accurate; the beam of radiation is about the width of a human hair, or as the executives like to say, it has “sub-millimeter accuracy.”

It gets better. The laser is built on the same mechanics as a spot welding machine on an auto production line. So the laser beam is on a huge mechanical arm that can move it all around your lung tumor. In fact, your lung tumor can get blasted with high doses of radiation from one hundred or so different angles.

It gets better. Not only is there no cutting, no blood, and no physical knives, but you can also rest on the laser machine's bed in your street clothes, plugged into your iPod, jamming to your favorite tunes.

It gets even better. Chemotherapy kills a lot of cells, even good ones. The laser only zaps the bad ones, so there's no nausea and vomiting.

The company tells the story of an eighty-five-year-old patient whose cancer went into remission after just three forty-five-minute treatments.

“Ablating tumors with sub-millimeter accuracy?” Are you serious?

Here's how one of the company executives actually described the process (after a bit of prodding from us):

“Imagine you have a lung tumor, and your doctor tells you they're going to treat your tumor using surgery—what does that mean? It means they have to cut you from front to back, open you up, and take out part of your lung. Then you have to recover from that major surgery.”

“So that’s your treatment option, and then the next day your doctor calls you and says, ‘I have a new treatment for you. It’s a laser. All you do is come in, lie down on a table for forty-five minutes a day for three days, and then you get up and walk away and you’re done.’ Which option would you choose?”

“The laser has the ability to treat cancerous tumors with sub-millimeter accuracy, which means it can attack and destroy a tumor within the width of a human hair—that’s how accurate it is.

“That’s really important because it means the treatment won’t kill or damage surrounding tissue—and that’s one of the things that makes our laser different from the competition and different from the other treatments used today to treat cancer.”

Now you’ll notice those last few paragraphs contain almost nothing about the company itself, and that’s intentional. Audiences need narrative; problem is, most companies don’t give it to them.

You’ll also notice that the executive used the dreaded phrase “ablating tumors with sub-millimeter accuracy” but then immediately explained and clarified it (with some magic words).

Have empathy for your audience.

The magic words can translate almost any kind of nonsense into something that actually makes sense for audiences—that’s why they’re magical.

Now the laser isn’t a miracle cure; the patients treated by it already have cancer and many of them die. But for patients without many options, for patients suffering from lung, brain, and prostate cancer, it can be a godsend, a lifesaver. And when you tell that story, you’ll have the attention of most audiences—because it’s about

them, it's not about the technology that ablates those tumors with sub-millimeter accuracy.

And that can be magical.

Your Homework

Organizing your narrative might be the most challenging part of your presentation. After all, you know so much about your subject matter that you could talk for days. It's very difficult to determine the ordering of your information, though. What goes first? What goes second? Think about your presentation from the audience's perspective. Or as a good friend once said, "Have empathy for your audience." If you were sitting in the twentieth row at your presentation, what would you want to hear?

You can do this. All it takes is a little work. The worksheet on the next page can help you develop and organize your narrative. You don't have to match things up perfectly, but see if you can put a few notes or talking points in each box, and then use the completed document as a cheat sheet when you practice your speech.

First things first: what's your headline or your lede? Does it pass the "So What? Who Cares?" test your audience will apply? Here's a good exercise: if you were writing an article about your subject matter for the front page of tomorrow's *New York Times*, what would be your headline and first sentence? Would it be all about you and your company, or would it be about your audience? Or can you combine the two objectives?

Now take your stories and statistics from chapter 2's homework and organize them using this form. Where do your stories and statistics go in the flow of your narrative? Remember, you can begin the presentation with a story, or you can spread them out to illustrate important points.

Would signposts make it easier for your audience to follow along? You don't have to have three things. Heck, you might keep it really simple and talk about only one thing (that too is a sign post). This worksheet is just a tool to guide you in the process. It can serve as a valuable starting point to help you organize your narrative. Said

another way, it'll ensure you don't use PowerPoint as your starting point.

So that's your homework.

You can download the worksheet at ElevatorSpeech.com.

Presentation Plan

HEADLINE

Clear, simple, conversational

SO WHAT? WHO CARES?

POINT 1

Illustration
(story, statistics)

POINT 2

Illustration
(story, statistics)

POINT 3

Illustration
(story, statistics)

CONCLUSION

4

**remember
mehraban**

Now that you've fine-tuned your narrative—the verbal part of your presentation—it's time to revisit Professor Mehrabian

to make sure your vocals and visuals (or nonverbal communication) enhance your story. Far too often, they stand in the way of it.

You'll recall that Mehrabian's research revealed that vocal and visuals can account for as much as 93 percent of your audience's perception when you speak about your feelings and attitudes.

Said another way, your audience puts a lot of weight on the expression they see on your face, the pitch and tone of your voice, the gestures you use, the speed at which you speak, and the overall energy you display.

In the end, presentations are more than just words. And when all three forms of communication work together, the impact is profound.

Vocals

Vocals signal intent, telling your audience how you're feeling at that moment.

Try this exercise to measure tone of voice: Say "good morning" like that annoyingly perky colleague who loves early-morning meetings. Now say "good morning" like the red-faced boss who's angry that you're late for the meeting with clients. Finally say "good morning" like you're the nervous twenty-two-year-old intern who has to admit to Jack Welch that he just clogged the toilet in Welch's private executive bathroom. Hear the difference? It's the same two words each time, but the meaning is totally different. And it's all because of the way you said them. Because of the vocals.

There are really three elements to a good vocal cadence: pausing, pacing, and projection. Let's look at each one separately.

Pausing

Next time you see a comedian in person or on television, listen for the silence. If it's a good comedian, he or she will be silent on stage

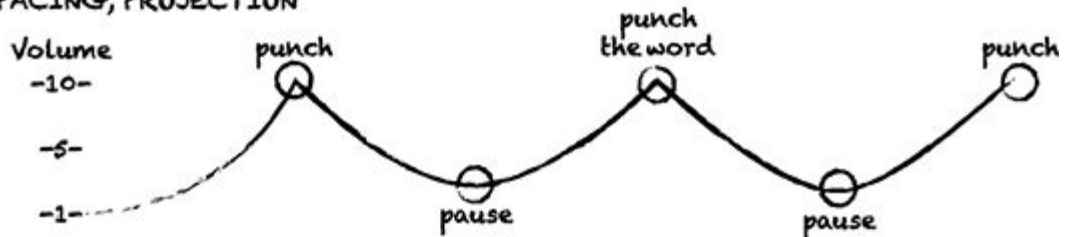
for several seconds in between jokes—hopefully as gales of laughter cascade throughout the room.

Do you ever remember being silent during a presentation for more than one or two seconds? Probably not, but there is tremendous power in pausing.

When President Obama was inaugurated on January 20, 2009, his opening words boomed out to hundreds of thousands of people on the National Mall in Washington, DC, and around the world. “My fellow citizens,” one second, two, three, four, “I stand here today” one second, two, three, “humbled by the task before us,” one second, two, three, “grateful for the trust you have bestowed,” one second, two, three, “mindful of the sacrifices born by our ancestors.”

There is tremendous power in pausing.

PAUSING, PACING, PROJECTION



His pauses were enormous, separating his thoughts for the audience and—on that occasion, quite practically—giving the sound system time to broadcast his voice to a massive audience, some of whom were probably standing about a mile away. The pauses also successfully isolated the only three words in his opening sentence that mattered: humbled, grateful, and mindful. That’s what he wanted citizens to absorb.

You can visualize good pausing as a series of peaks and valleys, like a rollercoaster ride. Master communicators hit a key point at the peak, and then use a pause (the valley) to let the message sink in. Or they’ll pause for a few seconds in the run-up to a major point, cueing the importance by saying something like, “If you remember

nothing else today when you get home, I want you to think about this..." (one, two, three, four) "pausing is a key skill in speaking well."

Pauses give the audience time to digest what you've already said and time to prepare for what you're about to say.

President Obama likes to pause right before a key word, which has his audience leaning forward as they await that next word. Others, like us, like to hit our point and then...pause...to let the audience marinate in that point. Either method can be effective. Both have audiences rocking forward and back like a cat with a ball of string.

Vocal pacing is key because it leads to emphasis, intonation, and a conversational tone. When people aren't prepared for a speech, it's typically the vocal aspect that suffers the most. They rush through their remarks, which are devoid of any human expression, and they use "high level" language that is barely decipherable to the audience. Vocals then flatline and things go downhill very quickly, especially if the language is accompanied by a boatload of bad slides.

We've coached lots of people who combined flat delivery with lots of non-words. One useful exercise another coach we know showed us is to only speak when you're touching a piece of furniture. So you stand and start your presentation rehearsal while resting your hand on the back of a chair.

Across the room, maybe fifteen feet away is another chair. At some point you remove your hand from the first chair and stroll slowly over to the other chair, and you DON'T SAY A WORD until you touch the back of the second chair.

The whole exercise takes three seconds but, oh, it seems like a lifetime to people who typically rush through speeches or fill pauses with non-words like *um* or *ah*.

Pauses give the audience time to digest what you've already said, and time to prepare for what you're about to say. We sometimes forget that, but master communicators—and good comedians and

presidents—know that pausing is a key element in effective speaking.

Another tip for people who can't pause: This Saturday morning, select an article from the newspaper. Read it once. Then read it again, and insert a circle every place you think it would be natural to pause when reading it aloud. Stand. Now read it out loud with an emphasis on those pause marks. Do this regularly and you'll start to build muscle memory around pauses.

Finally, set yourself up to succeed on presentation day. Never take the stage without a bottle of water. It allows you to manufacture pauses at predesignated points in your presentation with a simple drink from the bottle. You'll eliminate that nasty lip smack that some presenters get when nervous, and you'll also build a pause into the process.

An audience won't work to listen.

Pacing

Picture this: you're in the boardroom with all the big cheeses from your company, or maybe a new business prospect or a grumpy client. Everyone settles in and the meeting begins. They all look at you and you start to speak.

At that point, adrenaline is coursing through your system. *Maybe this is what crack feels like*, you think. Perhaps you've had an extra cup of coffee or one of those disgusting-tasting energy drinks to make sure you're full of oomph; perhaps you've exercised that morning to keep your energy high, or maybe you're just naturally exuberant.

Whatever the reason, when you open your mouth to speak, the words come out faster than Jeff Gordon's car speeds around a NASCAR track during the Daytona 500. You barely take a breath as you speed through the presentation's key points and, possibly, PowerPoint slides. It seems like speed-reading, and it's like turning a

fire hose on your audience from two feet away. Thirsty though they may be, a lot of water is going to go right by them and be wasted.

We've got to get cadence and pacing right. Pausing is part of it, but a conversational tone and the right language also help ensure comfortable pacing. And it's no surprise that rehearsing also helps a great deal.

It's fun to watch great speakers use pacing. When they want to create dramatic tension, they'll often inch closer to the audience and lower their tone a little—almost a conspiratorial whisper to pass along a great nugget of information.

When they want to crank up the emphasis and energy a bit, they'll go loud and their verbal cadence could be visualized as huge mountaintops with deep valleys in between them. The pacing crests and then falls off for a second or two.

You may think that pausing and pacing seem almost trivial, but they are more important than you may think—to the audience's attention, to your ability to connect, and to message delivery. Which brings us to projection.

Projection

Dave's a loudmouth. He admits it. His wife knows it. And Andy suffers from it. So in a conference room or boardroom, Dave doesn't really need a microphone. But not everyone is a loudmouth; some people need amplifying. And when you're speaking, a key thing for the audience is this: they have to be able to hear you.

An audience won't work to listen. If they can't hear you, they'll quickly move on to texting, telephoning, talking to each other, or just eating their rubber-chicken lunch.

Tip: get out of your chair.

But if you combine great, deep pauses with comfortable verbal pacing and projection that's loud enough to reach the person in the back row (who is loudly slurping his iced tea), you'll have ticked another box in the progression to becoming a master communicator.

The key is to strike the right balance. Too soft and slow is agonizing. Too loud and fast is like listening to your teenager's favorite speed metal band. On a scale of one to ten, your audience will appreciate you if you hit volume six to seven for most of your presentation, and they'll really lean forward if you occasionally dial it up and down to keep them off balance.

You should be at your loudest at the very beginning of your presentation—when nerves have a Jedi-like stranglehold on your vocal chords and your diaphragm. Punch it out for the back seats in that critical opening two minutes.

Remote presentations are almost a no-win format, particularly a telephone conversation or a webcast. They automatically remove the visual of the presenter, one of the most dominant forms of communication (as you'll read shortly). Your audience can't see you. And you just know they're checking their e-mails, talking to colleagues, and only half listening to you. In this case, vocal communication takes on even more significance. It becomes more important for presenters to pause, change their volume, and add emphasis to certain words or statistics.

Here's a tip: get out of your chair. Get a headset on, and walk and talk. Gesture as if your audience is sitting right in front of you. You'll be more conversational. You'll have more performance energy. You'll have greater volume, since your diaphragm will be elongated, allowing increased airflow. Research also shows that we're more believable when we stand. So stand and punch it, even if your only audience is the cat.

Um, ah, right, so, you know

Michael Erard wrote *Um...: Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders and What They Mean*. He notes a fascinating exercise in the book. Researchers recorded nineteen hundred telephone conversations. Transcribed them into eighty thousand words. Twenty-five percent of those words were fillers: "um, ah, right, so, you know." Four percent alone were "um." The point is that it's natural and everyone does it, but it's necessary to curb once it becomes distracting. You can do two things to reduce or eliminate this pattern.

First, practice. Nine times out of ten, use of fillers indicates a lack of preparation. In your mind you're trying to recall which slide comes next or which sentence in your handwritten script comes next, but what you say while thinking is some version of "um, ah, right, so, you know."

The second is to retrain your muscle memory. This is a longer process for those serial language fillers. When you feel the urge to fill with "um," squeeze your throat muscles to stop the progression. This one might take a village, people. At the public speaking group Toastmasters, audience members clap their hands every time a speaker says "um." They snap their fingers when they hear "ah." They shake a can of pennies when they hear "you know." And so on. It's incredibly annoying and frustrating, but it makes the presenter aware of their annoying tic. Because most people don't realize they fill their sentences with so many fillers.

Left untreated, a pronounced tic can prevent you from getting your message across.

Does this really happen? As Sarah Palin might say, "You betcha." Here's one sad but true story with identifying elements removed to protect the guilty:

Several years ago, the entire senior management team of a multibillion-dollar software company gathered at a luxury resort for an offsite meeting. These kinds of retreats are common for managers, of course. During this particular offsite, the CEO had brought in an economist to speak to his senior executives, someone from an Ivy League institution, a deep thinker who could outline what the economic outlook could be in twelve to eighteen months—information that would be critical to the company's prospects and product lineup.

Let's call the economist Bob.

Unfortunately, two things combined to sabotage Bob's presentation. First, more than fifty executives sat in the meeting room with their laptop computers open, their eyes darting between him and their computers. The darkened room was lit by the low glow of their screens. Second, Bob possessed an undiagnosed and crippling "um" tic.

A pronounced tic can prevent you from getting your message across.

As the presentation started, Bob, possibly nervous at speaking to such tech industry bigwigs, stammered through his opening remarks before slides filled with dense economic data were projected onto a large screen.

Like Jim in our opening chapter, Bob peppered his remarks with “ums” and “ers” to the extent that the executives started to send each other text messages from their computers making fun of him. In fact, one attendee said the execs were betting on just how many non-words Bob would use during his presentation. One person was assigned to count the tics and meanwhile a mini Las Vegas blossomed in the room as the execs bet money.

“I had him down for two-fifty,” said one exec who attended. “Others had three hundred, four hundred.”

An hour later one senior manager had some extra spending money for his offsite evening activity.

The economist’s message didn’t get through.

If only Bob had practiced his remarks and asked someone to evaluate him before flying across the country to speak to the bigwigs.

We don’t know for sure, but we’re willing to bet that Bob wasn’t invited back—and that to this day he remains blissfully unaware of his shortcomings when it comes to presenting effectively.

Visual

Presentations are a lot like show-and-tell in elementary school. And what your body language shows needs to be aligned with what you’re telling your audience in words. If they contradict one another, your audience will believe what they see versus what they hear. That’s where Mehrabian’s research really comes into play—visuals accounting for 55 percent of the impact in some instances. Yet this is another area that the overwhelming majority of speakers ignore.

Eyes always, always, always beat ears when it comes to ingesting information. Oh sure, we listen with our ears, but have you ever seen

someone give a speech when his zipper was open? Do you remember anything he said? Probably not. Have you ever seen someone use the “fig leaf” position when speaking? Hands crossed at the crotch. Awkward, right?

Visuals account for 55 percent of the impact in some instances.

We’re visual creatures.

We’re talking not only about the visuals for the speaker—what she wears, does he move around, are the gestures distracting, and so forth—but also the staging of the event. If speakers are trapped behind a podium with an attached microphone, it’s tough to deliver a good speech.

While we’re on the subject, let us say a word about something we absolutely, completely, and utterly hate: podiums. We’re convinced they are the devil’s furniture.

Some years ago we were tabbed as “difficult” by an event management company because we insisted that they move a podium occupying center stage in the room where we were scheduled to speak.

The conversation went something like this:



Eventually, after supervisors were called and feelings hurt, the podium was shifted to the side of the stage.

Podiums suck royally because 1) they put a big block of wood between you and your audience, 2) they encourage lazy presenters to read from scripts that rest on the podium, and 3) each of those things flatten vocal patterns, eliminate eye contact, and siphon the energy right out of the room.

Finally, a podium limits presenters' physical pacing—your movement on whatever stage you're using, whether it's a conference room or an actual conference stage with hundreds of people watching. Movement is a key element of an effective presentation, and its execution is a common source of uncertainty. Focus on movement with purpose.

Have you ever watched comedian Chris Rock? He is constantly in motion on stage, whipping his microphone cord aside as he paces frantically from side to side, telling jokes.

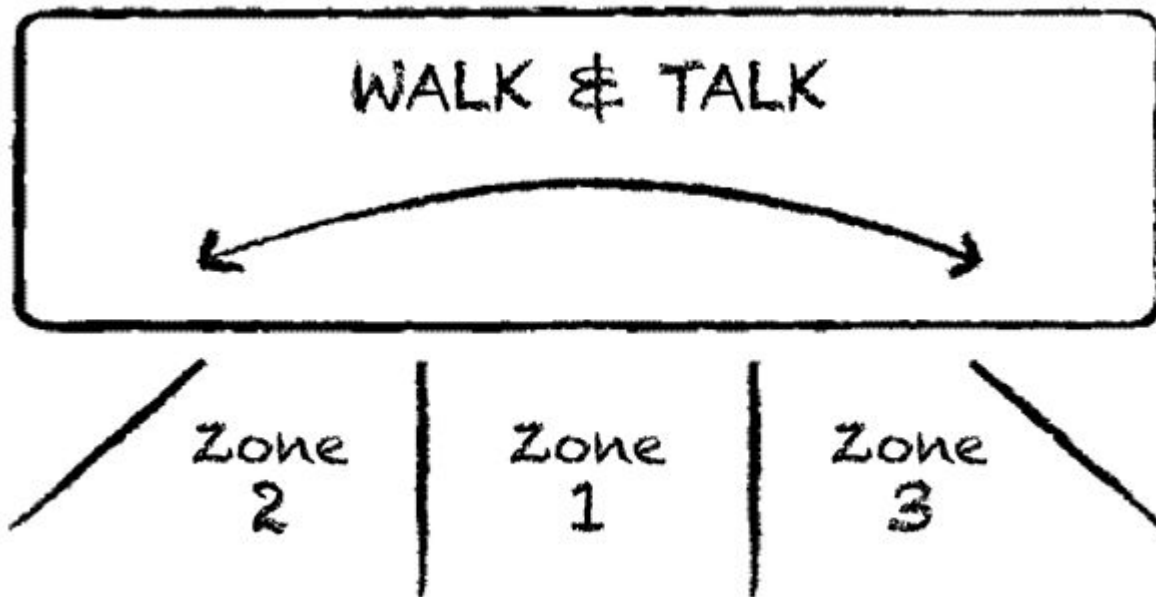
We can't all be Chris Rock, and frankly even trying to make a wisecrack can be the quickest way to kill a speech, but we can learn from how performers like Rock move.

"I think Eddie (Murphy) taught me this, early on," Rock told *Inside the Actor's Studio* host James Lipton some time ago. "It's just a little device. If you stand in one place, people can talk to their friends...but if you move they have to pay attention."

Podiums are the devil's furniture.

We coach speakers to move in a shallow semicircle facing the audience. Not only so they have to stay involved like Rock's audiences, but also because movement like that helps shake off adrenaline that's coursing through the body of every speaker ever (hint: if someone says they don't get nervous before a speech, that person is lying or clueless. Fear of public speaking is the #1 fear.)

When you don't walk comfortably from side to side, adrenaline will do funny things to your body, introducing a series of distracting "tics." Some speakers sway from side to side, as if bracing in a strong breeze; others will cross their legs at the ankles, seemingly indicating that they have to pee; others will do the side-to-side two-step (of your Uncle Maury after three gin and tonics at the last family wedding); others will take small steps toward and then away from the audience, giving the impression that the speaker is also a salsa dancer.



All of these tics are things unchanneled adrenaline can do to a body. A casual stroll from one side of the stage to the other (think Steve Jobs during his Macworld keynotes) will shake off the adrenaline and can also help you think as you walk and talk. Small pauses in that walk will make you appear thoughtful and perhaps even wise.

In other words, you need to calibrate your movements just like you calibrate your messages. Left untended, bad pacing can kill a speech, just as good pacing can enhance it.

We're admittedly stubborn about staging. Garr Reynolds of PresentationZen.com talks about "presenting naked," which means that there's nothing between you and the audience.

Nothing. Zip. Nada.

Especially not a podium. We hate those things.

Ready Stance

Without a podium to protect you, you'll need to consider your presence, and that starts with your stance. The key visual stance is what you might call "open." Think of it like you're about to give someone a big hug. Nothing is crossed, you're energetic, you're

smiling, and your body language is completely open toward the audience. If you're in a big arena, you gesture above your shoulders.

If this seems a little like acting, it is. Actors often talk about "performance energy," and it's a similar thing for great speakers. By now, you already know that you can't just say the words; the next step is to completely own the material you're "performing" and command the room.

If that sounds like hard work, it is. But we didn't say this was going to be easy, did we? We said it's pretty straightforward.

Eye Contact

A lack of attention to your eye contact can cripple even the best presenter. A good rule of thumb for eye contact is to look at each member of your audience for one or two seconds as you talk. If you stare at an audience member for longer than two seconds, it can get awkward for the audience member. Think about it—when was the last time you stared into someone's eyes for, say, five or six seconds? Try it now. Stop reading and look at yourself in the mirror for five seconds or look at your spouse or dog for five seconds. It seems like an eternity, right? (Don't try this out on the guy sitting next to you on the train. You might start a fight).

Eye contact is a key part of body language.

Typically, when we stare at people for five seconds or longer, it's a prelude to a kiss or a fight. It's "animal kingdom" time when the dominant predator tries to establish, well, dominance.

You can't do that to your audience. For practice, in your next meeting count, *one Mississippi, two Mississippi*, in your head as you look at your colleagues or friends around a table. That's a socially acceptable amount of eye contact and something we do almost without thinking when we're in casual conversations.

Now try this in your next meeting: look at each person for a fraction of a second. Flit your eyes around that table like Richard

Nixon at a press conference during Watergate; look at ten people in a second.

No matter what you're saying at that point, people will think you're lying. Such a frantic lack of eye contact makes audience members think the speaker is insincere.

Another common trait we see in our corporate clients is looking at inanimate objects when things get uncomfortable. For example, perhaps the company's quarterly earnings aren't good. We've seen CEOs stare mournfully at the conference table or podium while addressing shareholders or employees—or, more accurately, during rehearsals with empty chairs where reporters, shareholders, or employees will be during the actual presentation.

Astute observers will read your body language when you speak. Eye contact is a key part of that body language, and as with most nonverbal elements, done well it can help cement your message; done badly or neglected, it can cripple your message.

Gestures

Rule of thumb for gestures: the bigger the room, the bigger the gestures.

If you're presenting in a big conference room, on a stage, or in a hotel ballroom, it's really difficult to gesture too big. Try it, go into the biggest room at your office—or just your backyard at home or any park. Imagine an audience before you, and lift your hands above your head like you're boasting about catching an enormous fish. It might feel weird (okay, it will feel weird), but such large gestures can help reinforce your message.

A lot of speakers will gesture within themselves; that is, their arms and hands will only move around in the general area of their stomachs and waists. If they're sitting around a small conference table, that's just fine. But even in a medium-sized room, gesturing big can help lift energy and emphasis during a speech.

When we're completely comfortable with what we're saying, our gestures seem totally natural and match what we say. But when we're not quite sure of the verbal, the visuals can get weird quickly. Just look at politicians running for office. There is often a

woodenness to them, sometimes because their gestures seem out of sync with what they're saying. We spend a lot of time watching debates, and sometimes it seems like there's an advisor standing behind the camera yelling, "MOVE YOUR ARMS!" at the candidates, who respond by doing just that. However, the gestures often seem completely disconnected from what they're saying, which can lead to comic results (think John Kerry, Mitt Romney).

Political candidates and corporate executives who've worked hard enough on their speeches will use gestures to enhance their messages. For example, during a poignant or emotional story, they will touch their right palm to their heart to emphasize how meaningful, how close to their very core, the story they're currently telling is for them at that point. Look closely and you can also see how they feel about their opponents; we're thinking here of a presidential candidate who was talking about his opponent and just happened to scratch his forehead with his middle finger as he mentioned what the other candidate was saying about him. Anyone watching with the sound off would have wondered why that candidate just flipped off the audience.

Move your arms.

One basic mistake many speakers make is gesturing with their palms facing their audience. This can appear defensive, even if you don't mean it that way. Gesture with your palms up (back of your hands facing the audience) and avoid pointing at the audience unless you're recognizing someone for great work. Pointing can be perceived as overly aggressive. That's why President Bill Clinton made famous use of his thumb and knuckle when emphasizing a point or aiming a critique directly at an individual. It took the edge off the gesture. Of course, if your intent is to scare the pants off your audience and get in their face, point away.

Instead of pointing outward toward a person or group, some speakers point downward with their index figure to help them punctuate a point. Both Barack Obama and George W. Bush

emphasize key points, beliefs, or assertions by jabbing at the air or tapping their index finger on the podium in front of them. (Yes, presidents get to use podiums; it comes with being the leader of the free world and having a really cool presidential seal. We still don't like podiums, but presidents outrank us—and they control Seal Team Six—so we'll defer just this once.)

Avoid pointing at the audience.

Lots of speakers don't know what to do with their hands when they're standing in front of a room. It's pretty simple: stand facing the audience, with your feet, knees, hips, and shoulders square to the room full of people. Keep your hands at your sides, and then raise them to gesture as you tell a story or make a point. Take that walk from side to side as you present, and you'll find that the gestures seem natural, as does the walking, eventually. (It takes a bit of practice at first to go from a stiff march to a casual stroll.)

The Physics of Smiling

Have you ever watched Richard Feynman talk about physics? It's fascinating. Go to YouTube and watch the "Feynman 'Fun to Imagine'" series. He's smiling the entire time. The 1965 Nobel Prize winner is talking about jiggling atoms and stuff we can't comprehend on a typical day. And then four minutes in, it hits us: we're smiling too.

Feynman loves the subject matter so much, and explains it with such simple, everyday illustrations as a cup of coffee or rubber bands or magnets, that we can't help but like it too. Maybe you should keep this in mind when pitching "enterprise software or IP telephony" or life insurance.

Feynman, "The Great Explainer," was to physics what Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton were to politics and world affairs: master communicators. Feynman liked to say that if a topic could not be explained in a freshman lecture, it was not yet fully understood. By keeping it simple and using mind-expanding words like "imagine," he

made science easy to understand and fun to follow. But it's the smile that sucked you in.

Cesar Millan, nicknamed "The Dog Whisperer," once said that dogs introduce themselves to other dogs through energy rather than names or identities. "It's energy before anything else," he explained to a troubled dog owner.

Smile. Just smile.

Presenters are a lot like dogs. It's about energy before anything else. If you walk on stage with positive energy, then the audience will be more open to your message. If you look as if that conference or presentation is the last place on earth you want to be, then—guess what—it's also the last place on earth your audience wants to be.

Before the "voice of God" announces your name at the next industry event and before you ever walk on stage, go to your happy place. Do whatever it is you have to do to get into a comfortable, confident zone. One client goes for a run the morning of big presentations. Another executive has his assistant limit him to one cup of coffee before big speeches—we've seen her quite literally pull the second cup from his grasp—because that second jolt of caffeine makes him too crazy.

Here's one last, simple application: smile. Just smile. A longtime client of ours who was the chief technology officer of a content management software company says it's now the first thing he does when he stands in front an audience of any size. He smiles. And he's noticed that a funny thing happens to the faces in the crowd. They return the favor and smile right back.

Sometimes the simplest things, in words and gestures, can have a profound impact.

Your Homework

Watch and analyze Sheryl Sandberg's December 2010 TED Women talk, "Why We Have Too Few Women Leaders"

(<http://tinyurl.com/WLted>). It's one of the best presentations we've seen in recent years, and it's worth watching in its entirety. It's a great example of the first four chapters coming together and coming to life on stage. What you'll see is a very polished presenter who has clearly put in a lot of time rehearsing—and rehearsing the right things.

As you watch, note the next two elements:

Sheryl's use of stories. We all remember stories—they stick more than anything else. Sheryl uses her stories strategically to illustrate her key points, to bring in some humor and personality, and to make her key messages memorable. The first comes at 1:45 into the presentation, and it's the most memorable. It reinforces her major message, includes humor, and gives her an immediate likability.

Sheryl's signposting. Note Sheryl's use of “verbal bullet points” to organize her narrative. At 4:08, after hitting the headline, citing some problematic statistics, and telling a memorable story that brings it to real life and makes it personal, she says “there are three” messages for those women who want to stay in the workforce. Very nice. You'll also notice her hands: when she says “there are three,” she nonverbally reinforces it with three fingers up in the air. She then clearly calls out each of the three at the right points, “Number one...”

Sheryl's headline that sets up her entire presentation. At 0:40, Sheryl says, “We have a problem. Women are not making it to the top of any profession anywhere in the world.” Strong. (We would have moved it to 0:04 from 0:40, since every part of her presentation falls from this headline.)

Sheryl's use of statistics to reinforce her major point. Listen for how Sheryl backs up the headline with a few surprising—and credibility enhancing—numbers.

Sheryl's use of the stage. We talk about “movement with purpose,” which is what you see in this presentation. She walks purposefully in a small arc to open herself to each side of the audience, and stops

and talks there for a while before slowly walking to the other end of the arc.

Sheryl's roll-with-it approach. Audiovisual and other technical problems happen sometimes. They just do. How you respond is what separates good presenters from bad. You'll notice a microphone glitch and a lot of static. So they bring her a handheld microphone and she just rolls with it. She didn't make it a bigger deal than it actually was.

Sheryl's comfort screen. This we don't like. There's way—way!—too much text on the downstage monitors. This is a danger-zone issue. She clearly knows her content, and she doesn't need this much stuff on her downstage screen. In fact, it could cause more trouble later on. You just need a stat or a word or two. You'll notice she regularly looks down to the screens. When you're looking down you're not connecting with your audience. This was a miss.

Sheryl's lip smack. This is a common distraction. She needs to bring a bottle of water to the stage and sip between the major sections of her presentation.

Sheryl's inflection at 7:15. "NO ONE gets to the corner office..." Nice emphasis.

Sheryl's pauses. Throughout the presentation, Sheryl's built in and rehearsed some good pauses for emphasis and effect. However, she's not pausing enough for laughter and applause. She's talking through and over them. Let your audience celebrate you and your presentation. Don't rob them of that euphoria or rob yourself of that stronger audience connection.

Sheryl's ending. Strong. She wrapped up with major statistics, themes, and a personal touch that tied back to her headline.

So that's your homework.

5

**you must
prepare**

Danah Boyd should never have taken the stage at
Web 2.0 in 2009.

She simply wasn't ready.

But she did. And she regretted it.

Boyd researches youth culture. She's based near Boston, and as folks in that part of the world sometimes say, she's "wicked smart" (only in New England they'd call her "wicked smaaaaart").

But the audience at Web 2.0 Expo doesn't care how smart you are once the presentation begins. They care if you can get to the point, make them think about your subject, and make them care about your point of view.

Boyd had written a paper, "Streams of Content, Limited Attention: The Flow of Information Through Social Media." It received compliments from those who read it. Trouble is, Boyd chose to read it out loud at the podium to hundreds of people, and things went sideways.

Because she was reading, she stumbled over her words. Her brain was moving faster along her script than her mouth was capable of. Because she was reading, her eyes were looking down at her paper rather than at the audience to whom she was speaking. Because she was reading, her language and delivery didn't sound natural. She hadn't translated the written word into the spoken word. Because she hadn't prepared, she hadn't built in pauses to give herself and her audience a breather.

Because Boyd didn't really pay attention to the staging, she didn't realize there was a massive projection screen behind her containing a live Twitter feed of attendees' comments.

Her audience revolted, and the Tweets started to pop up on the screen. Here are three of the nicest Tweets that ran over Boyd's head:

@billyger: danah boyd from microsoft is talking way too fast. It's hard to follow and I have no idea what she is talking about. #w2e

@dandam: Danah Boyd loves coffee. #w2e

@andybudd: Wow, people are bleeding out of danah boyd's somewhat dry and academic lecture

Which led to this mea culpa several days later on Boyd's blog: "Unfortunately, my presentation at Web 2.0 Expo sucked. I knew something was wrong because folks started laughing in the audience."

We agree that this experience is a commentary on how awful we can be sometimes as humans. No one should have to endure what Boyd did, particularly when she had the courage initially to take the stage and lay herself and her ideas out there for public consumption and criticism. In fact, we strongly recommend that you never—ever—accept a speaking invitation at a conference where a live Twitter feed runs over your head and behind you.

Of course, hindsight is 20/20. No one is perfect, but Boyd has definitely learned from her 2009 speech. The hard way.

That said, the entire debacle was ultimately Boyd's fault. Had she rehearsed out loud—away from the script and on camera—this all could have been avoided. The humiliation. The hit to her confidence. The lasting image. The YouTube video. That doesn't make the audience's behavior right. It's simply a reminder that the success of a presenter lies squarely on his or her own shoulders. It's the presenter's job to rock it. Sometimes that's a hard lesson to learn.

Staging

There is a lot of important but generally unseen work to do between rehearsal and game day.

Do you know what the room looks like? Is the stage five feet off the ground, or is it a floor-level platform? Is the seating like a theater, or are the seats flat on the floor? Are there comfort screens

downstage so you can see your notes? Can they give you a lavalier microphone so you can walk and talk? Is there a podium?

These are just a few of the questions that should be in your game preparation for every presentation.

Remember, podiums suck; don't get us started.

The conference coordinator can send you a diagram of the room for a large audience presentation, and the executive assistant can send you a photo of the conference room for your next sales meeting. The point is, you don't want a single surprise when you enter the room the morning of your presentation. Surprises affect your confidence. And a flustered, frazzled speaker will have a tough time getting the audience's attention or gaining the prospect's trust.

For example, we typically insist on having a small round table to our left for a bottle of water and our laptop—because we want to drive any videos or visuals ourselves. We never let a production company run it from the back of the house. Never. We want control of everything, particularly the ability to jump to a video that's relevant to the flow of the session.

Lots of professionals use checklists to make sure things go smoothly—think airline pilots or surgeons—and you should too. Here's a pre-presentation checklist for you to consider. You won't look like a diva if you request some or all of these accommodations, and would you really care if you did? You'll simply look like a seasoned presenter who knows what you need to be comfortable.

You can download the worksheet at ElevatorSpeech.com.

A Partial Presentation Checklist

- How big is the stage and is there a podium?
- Will you have a lavalier (lapel) microphone so you can walk and talk?
- Will the placement of the projector allow you freedom to move on stage?
- Do you want to run your presentation from your laptop on stage or will the AV team run it from the back of the room?
- Who will run your backup slide deck (if you use one)?
- Do you have a backup of your slides, right?
- Do you need flip charts or props of any sort on stage?
- Do you need a printout of your slides for reference?
- Will you videotape your presentation?
- What's the dress code for the event?
- Is there a sound check/AV check set for your presentation?
- Do you need handout materials of any sort? And if so, how will you distribute them?
- Do you need handheld microphones for audience members (if you're going to have audience participation)?
- Make sure you have water on stage.
- Do you know how long your presentation slot is, and will there be a question and answer period afterward?
- Be sure your cellphone is completely switched off or away from your computer. No coins in your pockets. No earrings that make noise.
- If you don't need Web access for your presentation, turn off your computer's WiFi to prevent any unwanted instant messages or e-mail notifications.
- Are you bringing your own clicker?
- Will you get evaluated as part of the conference follow-up, or do you need to solicit your own feedback?
- And, finally, it sounds basic but don't forget the power cord for your computer. These are pretty straightforward questions, but you'd be amazed at how many speakers from brand-name companies neglect to ask them.

Practice Out Loud

This one's easy. You practice, you'll be better. You don't, and you won't.

Too many presenters don't practice out loud. We can't tell you the number of times company executives have blown off presentation rehearsals because their "slides aren't done yet." Slides should be the last things you focus on, not the first.

That lack of preparation really shows on presentation day—not only in the length and content of the presentation but also in the delivery style. Incoherent content is what draws out those ums and ahs and distracting nonverbal tics. And that's when your audience checks out.

When we asked a group of executives what they wanted to get out of our coaching session, one person got almost confrontational when anticipating our teaching points:

"I had a personality test conducted twenty-five years ago, and it showed that I'm at my best when I'm spontaneous. So I will *never* practice." Practice, he went on to explain, took away his authenticity.

Sigh.

You practice, you'll be better.

We responded by asking whom he thought was the most spontaneous, authentic speaker he'd ever seen. His response? Apple's Steve Jobs.

At this point, we suggested he work on his definition of never. We also shared one of our favorite anecdotes from the January 5, 2006, edition of *The Guardian* in London (<http://tinyurl.com/WLjobs>).

For every forty-five-minute keynote Steve Jobs used to deliver at Macworld, he'd spend two full days in dress rehearsal on the same stage at the Moscone Center in San Jose. Two full days, out loud, on stage, in dress rehearsal. That's not counting all the weeks of prep time, message development, and effort leading up to those rehearsals. Word is the doors were locked and there was even a

Porta-Potty in the corner of the room. Do you know anyone who commits that amount of time to rehearsal? We don't either.

The key is to build muscle memory.

That's one of the reasons Jobs stood apart as a master presenter. He recognized that presentations were part of his job and required the same degree of focus, discipline, and preparation as any other executive responsibility. And that level of preparation was why—on game day at Macworld—it appeared to our client and the rest of the world as if Jobs hadn't practiced at all.

The key is to build muscle memory. The more you practice something, the better you get at it, and the less you think about what you're doing while you do it. It's the same in sports, music, acting, carpentry, and yes, presenting.

(Years later, still no word from our executive with the personality test. We assume that's because he's busy practicing for his next "spontaneous" Jobs-like presentation.)

There was an interesting documentary some time ago about *The Silence of the Lambs*, the 1991 thriller in which Sir Anthony Hopkins won an Academy Award for his chilling portrayal of the cannibal Hannibal Lecter.

So how does one prepare to inhabit a character like Lecter? Hopkins admits that he has a "little bit of an obsession" when it comes to rehearsing. "What I do is I go over and go over and go over it. I take a section of the script, and I go over it twenty times, thirty times. And as I build up to two hundred fifty times, I know that I know that I know it. As Hamlet says, 'The preparation is all.' You can't wing these things. You must prepare and prepare and prepare."

Can we get an amen from the congregation?!

From that preparation came an Oscar.

Now two hundred fifty times is staggering. But imagine if you read through your "lines" for your next speech twenty-five times, or even 2.5 times. You'd own your material and be able to take the stage with a great deal of performance energy while simultaneously appearing

relaxed and confident. These are the marks of a true master communicator.

Want to see us go crazy? Have a CEO (like the executive above) tell us, “Oh, I don’t like to practice too much for my speeches. I like to wing it.” When this happens, the CEO is mistaking diligent rehearsal and careful calibration of materials for “winging it,” because it appears so natural and comfortable that audiences think the speakers must be winging it.

The best presenters who appear effortless on stage or on screen are more often than not the ones who practice more than anyone else.

Practice presenting out loud.

Winston Churchill was said to prepare forty-five minutes for every one minute of speech he delivered, even in the midst of war. Martin Luther King Jr. practiced fifteen hours each week for his Sunday sermons—when the civil rights movement was tearing at the fabric of the country.

There’s no substitute for out-loud practice. If they can do it, so can you.

It sounds simple enough, but few presenters practice out loud. Fewer still record rehearsals on video and play it back—the ultimate preparation process. No camera? Do it in front of the bathroom mirror, in the shower, in the car, on your morning walk, or into your voice mail at work. Just do it. That way, you get used to the rhythms of your speech; you understand what to emphasize and what to edit. Be merciless in what you remove. Not sure what works or what doesn’t? Deliver the next five to ten minutes of your next presentation to a colleague or a group of friends. You’ll rapidly find out what works and what doesn’t.

We watched it firsthand with Kevin Hogan, then CEO of Zurich Global Life Insurance, a massive insurance company based in Switzerland. Each year the company gathers approximately three

hundred of its top business leaders in one place to kick off the year's efforts.

Hogan had done a lot of thinking about what he wanted to say. He had written several pages of notes and thoughts. After a few telephone conversations and edits to his script, we met in a conference room at the Newark Airport Hilton over the holiday break in January 2012.

He embraced seven hours of work on his narrative for his two major presentations, much of it on camera. We played back the recorded rehearsals and collectively critiqued his words and delivery to build upon his existing strengths and ideas. By the end of the session, we had crafted a new opening and structure for his two presentations—which were only two weeks away. We also left him with a video camera to take back to Switzerland for additional practice.

It's infrequent that an executive makes that next commitment. Their job usually gets in the way of subsequent rehearsals, and the awkwardness of videotaping yourself is easily avoidable. But Hogan—like Jobs—recognized that presenting is part of his job. CEOs are called on to inspire, rally teams, deliver hard news, and bring clarity to complex business issues. That all takes a lot of work.

To our surprise and delight, Kevin did his homework, literally. He set up the video camera in a back room in his Zurich home and recorded the next iteration of his narrative and delivery. The Sunday evening before his Wednesday-morning kickoff, we received links to several videotaped rehearsals. Each version was progressively better.

On Wednesday, he took the stage with this opening, "I'm going to do something a little bit different. I'm going to talk about three things today. I'm going to talk about engines. I'm going to talk about hedgehogs. And I'm going to talk about sherpas."

That unexpected opening gave a creative, memorable hook to his primary messages, and stories illustrated each of the three.

Hogan delivered his thirty-and forty-five-minute presentations without notes or a comfort screen, accompanied by only a few

photos on his slides. He employed a conversational tone and a smooth walk-and-talk delivery up and down a catwalk stage.

This was no small feat. Weeks earlier in Newark, we had prepared for a theater-in-the-round stage arrangement. Without an early arrival and a lot of at-home practice, this staging surprise could have chipped away at his confidence.

Confidence comes in no small part from figuring out the words first. Kevin Hogan's "talk track" was the basis for the rest of his presentation, it's vocal cadence and its visual staging. Even though it's only 7 percent of Mehrabian's findings, it's a critical 7 percent that essentially triggers the rest of a good presentation.

The problem in most corporations is that people prepare backward—they develop their slides first instead of figuring out the talk track. Or worse still, they cobble together a presentation by cutting and pasting a mishmash of previously used slides from colleagues, creating a "blob" of visuals with no discernible point or narrative.

On Wednesdays at 30 Rockefeller Plaza in New York, writers and actors from *Saturday Night Live* sit around a big conference table. They all hold scripts for the coming Saturday's show, and they perform what's known as a "table read." They're trying to find the talk tracks for the various skits. They know that's the critical thing when you have millions of people watching you on live television.

If SNL prepared like corporations, they'd design sets, put on makeup, wear costumes, consider lighting, and then—and only then—they'd look at all those visuals and think, "Gee, wonder what I'm going to say here?"

That'd be insane. But it's how most corporate speakers get ready for a presentation.

Break that mold. Find your talk track first, then like Kevin Hogan, you'll know that what you say provides the right launch pad for how you say it and what your visuals look like.

Your Homework

There are two steps to your homework—one right before your presentation and one right after. Each step employs the same tools:

video and evaluations.

Video: For the next two months, make your company's presenters rehearse out loud two to three weeks ahead of their next presentations. No PowerPoint. Just talk out the content: the messages and the stories. Videotape it and play it back. Then repeat. It will have a tremendous impact.

There's a reason that coaches in sports as varied as golf, football, and soccer watch game film before and after contests: that film often shows very clearly what went right and what went wrong. It's the same situation for speakers. If you're videotaping and watching rehearsals, you'll see what's working and what isn't. If you watch the "game film" after a speech—a sort of presentation postmortem—you'll know what the audience saw, and you'll be able to see if those messages you worked so hard to develop actually got through.

By some estimates (including ours), each minute of a fabulous speech will require roughly one hour of preparation. If you think that's a lot, consider the cost of not preparing for that critical presentation to your boss, employees, prospects, partners, customers, shareholders, or reporters. The good news is that once you've endured the preparation once, you can often shorten it considerably for future variations on the same speech.

Evaluations: You've practiced your presentation diligently. You've got clean, simple slides. You feel good when you get in front of the audience, and they applaud mightily at the end of your speech. Heck, you feel great. But how do you know that you're hitting the mark? How do you know your message is embedded in the brains of all the audience members?

Here's how.

An evaluation form is an efficient way to solicit instant feedback from your audience during rehearsals and on game day. It's not always possible to get such feedback, but if you can, you should. Too many speakers are scared to ask for feedback; we think that's a huge mistake.

Here's what we've done at various corporate clients. The Coaching Session Feedback form on page 105 is printed and available in the room. Let's say you speak to forty people in a conference room. The form is in front of each person or is handed out immediately after your speech. You, or someone else on your team, then say something like:

Evaluation Form

Thanks for coming to Dave's speech today. We appreciate you being here, and we want to make sure it was a good use of your time. There's an evaluation form in front of you; please spend sixty seconds filling it out and please DON'T put your name on it. We're only interested in candid comments, not who said them. You can fold the forms in half and put them in the box by the door before you exit. Thank you so much.

You'd be amazed at how useful this simple exercise can be for speakers, during rehearsal or after the official presentation. When we coach senior executives, we videotape them presenting and often use this form so the entire audience can provide input. The execs get an earful from us, and they see themselves on video. They also get peer feedback from colleagues who understand the business like they do—that's insight almost no one else can provide.

The feedback form has three basic buckets: verbal, vocal, and visual. Verbal is of course what you say—the words that come out of your mouth. Vocal is the rhythm, pacing, and cadence—giving feedback on the use of any non-words or whether you are speaking too fast or too softly. Visual is everything else—how you look, how you move, and your eye contact.

Combined, the video footage and the evaluation forms will give you precious insight into what your audience hears, sees, and absorbs from your presentation.

Be brave. This particular homework assignment will be uncomfortable; no one likes being videotaped or critiqued. Do it anyway. It will make you and your team better presenters.

So that's your homework.

You can download the worksheet at ElevatorSpeech.com.

Coaching Session Feedback

<i>Rate from poor to excellent:</i>	1	2	3	4	5	COMMENTS
VERBAL						
Clear Point						
Examples						
Stories						
Language						
Jargon						
VOCAL						
Projection						
Variety						
Non-Words						
Speed						
VISUAL						
Posture/Stance						
Movement						
Gestures						
Expression						
Eye Contact						
Dress/Appearance						
OVERALL						
Energy						
Passion						
Q&A						
PowerPoint						

Summary

Let's go right back to where we started. In summary, our counsel to executives boils down to one simple acronym: **S.T.O.R.Y.**

On page one of this book we introduced you to Jim and his forty-five-minute, sixty-slide presentation with its three hundred “um-ah” stammers. For us that is a relatively common scenario. Executives with years of experience and mountains of industry knowledge still make fundamental mistakes when it comes to speaking well. They don't tell stories, they use too many slides, and they don't practice out loud.

It's not complicated; in fact, it's so far from rocket science it falls into the category of what Dave's dad used to call “the bleeding obvious” (which was our second favorite title for this book). But if you do your homework, if you stop the slide tsunami, if you tell great stories, if you organize your speech so it flows beautifully, if you pay homage to what Mehrabian found about believability, and if, above all, you prepare meticulously, then you will ascend to membership in that exclusive club of truly effective speakers—and a place from which your career can often skyrocket.

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