

Walking the boards

You believe in your products – but will the client's board believe in you? Acting school can help

We've all been on basic presentation courses and they're fine for making a competent showing,

provided we stick to those basics. But the key to really engaging with clients, either in formal or semi-formal settings, lies in raising your performance to really inspire – and where better to go than the acting profession for training and advice.

According to David Sibley – an ex-Computercenter sales guru and now running his own coaching consultancy, People Achieving – there is an obvious need for practice in giving presentations, and a regular session at a drama school can really raise the bar. “The idea is to learn techniques that put you in touch with a range of emotions so you can communicate more effectively in work situations,” he says. “Drama school can also help you focus on an audience and how to use your voice. Customers pick up on your intentions – which come from emotion – very quickly. If they can see through to your ‘inner truth’ they’ll know you are sincere and will buy that – people really do buy people first.”

In a drama setting you would most likely practice playing roles according to so-called method acting, which draws on emotions and experiences when portraying a character and is more about communication than giving a flashy performance (Al Pacino and Marlon Brando are famous method actors). Sibley says especially good roles connect truth and emotion – one of his favourites is Kevin Costner's courtroom scene in JFK.

By practising such material, particularly with an acting coach on hand, you will certainly learn about techniques such as when and how to increase intensity, the power of pausing for effect, the use of appropriate gestures, the tempo and dynamics of your voice and much more. Probably the most important technique, reckons Sibley, is the use of your eyes – looking at your audience as you are speaking, and not of course reading slides or notes (which we all know is a no no – but without the discipline of learning a script in the same way an actor learns a part and knowing how to deliver it properly it's all too easy



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to retreat into a Powerpoint death wish).

You don't have to look at actors, films and plays – not for nothing are clips of politicians used in presentation training. As Sibley points out, connecting with audiences is absolutely fundamental to their performance, noting the superb technique of people such as Bill Clinton, who can engage with a room just by eye contact and smiles without even saying anything. (And that's another point – with so much communication being non-verbal, mime acting can also be a very valuable learning experience.)

This also shows that presentation is not just about formal stand up and deliver – there are also implications for situations such as working a room, manning a stand at a show and, crucially, for meetings where discussion of your offerings is on the agenda. That latter situation – where you could be faced with a table full of C-level execs, many polished themselves in presentation – is now more common than a formal stand-up. You'll be entering a room, aiming to sit in a good location, and perform sitting down using handouts. You could practice using actors to role-play board members (the Performance Business does this – see Resources).

Sibley says the performance needs to begin as soon as you enter – eye contact and sizing up the situation needs to happen immediately (no fumbling with a laptop or handouts) – and the acting techniques for intensity, pacing and so on are just as applicable once you get into the meeting and start to talk people through your proposal.

Sibley adds that you don't have to go to a drama class – there's a lot you can do on your own or perhaps with partners, say by buying a film script and practising passages at home. Get yourself a video camera and compare yourself with original sequences. The first step, he says, is

to become aware of the range of techniques you can add to your armoury. You can also build up your own work scripts that could be tested in a class – just how can you inspire people with a story about CRM or storage servers? With products you have to work really hard on the emotional elements.

And to all you salespeople who think you are already pretty good at presentation, there is a word of warning – ego. “All the time your ego is on the stage or leading the meeting your intent is in the wrong place – it should be on the customer,” says Sibley. “The more you practice re-enacting parts the more chance your ego won't be up-front.”

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RESOURCES

- People Achieving/David Sibley. He's currently coaching a Hollywood film director on winning a film to direct. Email: david_sibley@peopleachieving.com
- Performance channel, Sky 202 – includes interviews with actors on how they prepare for parts
- The Performance Business – business acting specialist. Visit www.theperformance.biz
- Charles School – drama workshops. Email: charles.verrall@virgin.net
- Runaway Jury – a film about power struggles and emotions
- Reading People – book by jury expert Jo-Ellan Dimitrius
- The Book of Tells – book about reading people by Peter Collett