

Talking Your Way to the Top

- **How to Take Your Career to the Next Level**
- **Why Can't Managers Deliver Better Presentations?**

THE PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIST

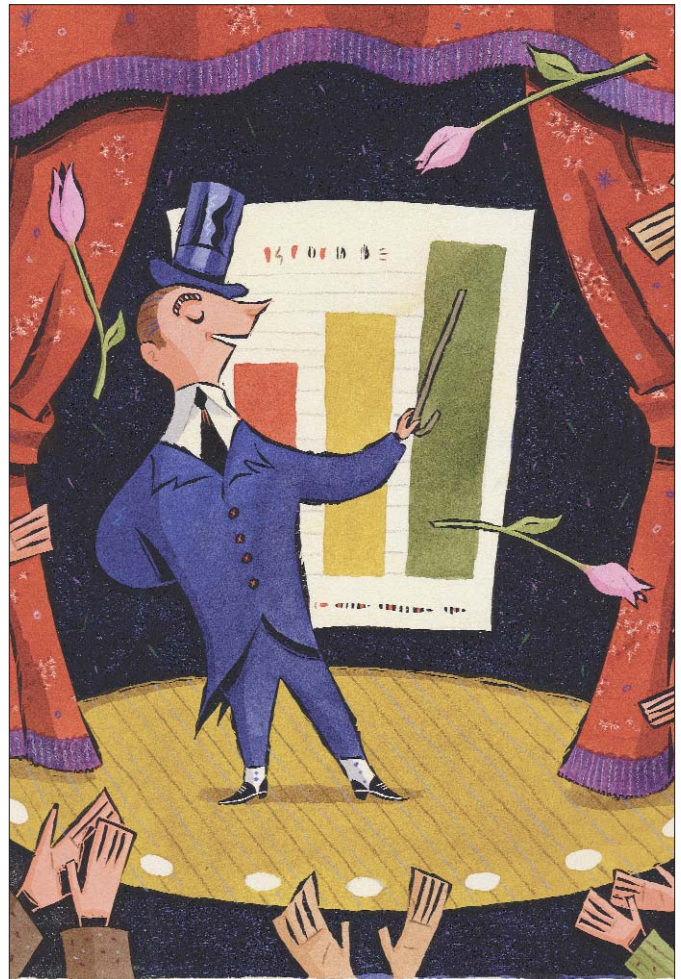
BY KAREN FRIEDMAN

A recent survey of senior managers who earned more than \$250,000 found that these executives believed their communication skills were the No. 1 reason they made it to the top. They said their ability to communicate helped them articulate company goals, personify company values and impress senior management, which in turn boosted their careers.

"I work with a lot of terrific people who are exceptional at what they do. But in order for them to take their careers to the next level, senior management needs to see them as leaders who can command attention and respect," says a senior executive at a pharmaceutical company, who asked that his name not be used. When delivering presentations, the executive says it's essential for them to be successful if they hope to advance their careers. The executive says a person's ability to present key information clearly and concisely is critical to their credibility and the respect they earn both internally and externally.

Yet even top-tier managers will privately admit that they are unsure about how to deliver more effective data-packed presentations that contain fewer slides and more personality. They acknowledge that their PowerPoint-driven presentations are too long; lack organization, substance and style; and sometimes fail to provide perspective, context or direction. Sheepishly, they divulge that this is the way it's always been done and they're afraid to leave out important information or personalize their presentations for fear of not being taken seriously.

While most communications coaches, including myself, will teach you to craft strong introductions and closings, or-



ganize material, develop powerful messages, and improve delivery and body language, you will be hard-pressed to connect with top executives if you do not learn how to connect with them emotionally. Based on hundreds of coaching sessions and conversations with scores of executives, I have compiled key presentation strategies that can help you advance your career.

Appeal to your audience's emotions

You know your business, which is why you are delivering information. So stop trying to jam 10 pounds of information into a 2-pound bag just to prove that you know your stuff. Figure out how to appeal to the audience's emotions. If you're talking technology, how will the technology save them time and money? Step out of your shoes and into theirs to talk from their perspective and address their concerns.

Leave a lasting impression

People remember impressions, not facts. They remember how you made them feel. When we saw stories about the tsunami this past December, we didn't remember all of the facts. But we'll never forget the stories, the images and how we felt when we saw almost indescribable pictures of death and devastation. People will not warm to your words if you don't appeal to their hearts. You must support facts and information with examples, anecdotes and images that leave a lasting impression.

View questions as opportunities

It's almost inevitable that management will interrupt your presentation to ask questions. As distressing as this can be, they are not trying to stump you. Think of questions as opportunities to address their concerns and use them to reinforce key points or deliver additional information. It's helpful to anticipate questions and prepare answers in advance.

Be quick and clear with the numbers

Obtaining the financing you need to grow your business might require delivering a financial presentation to investors before you can ask them for money. Delivering information and presenting the numbers is not enough. You must be clear, concise and credible. You must quickly articulate what your business will provide, how the company will make money, what you are doing to address problems and anticipated hurdles, and how your product or service will benefit customers.

No one came to see a slide show

Today's business presenters often equate preparation to creating a slide presentation. Visuals should reinforce what you say, not serve as your script. The fewer slides you use, the more impact you'll have because you'll be free to look at people and engage them. Audiences are looking to you to make sense of information. Prepare your presentation first. Then develop visuals that support your key messages. By the time you speak, you should be able to deliver your words without the slides.

Avoid long-winded answers

Senior executives are a bit like television reporters. They want you to get to the point — quickly. When they ask a question, they want the facts, not long-winded answers. If

they interrupt you in the middle of a slide to ask a question, they want you to answer the question and then move on instead of answering the question and repeating all of the information on the slide. Often, presenters give long answers to management questions to buy time, fill the silence or because they think a brief response is too simplistic. The adage "less is more" still holds true. Long answers frequently dilute messages, lack examples and open the door for further unwanted questions.

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Keep your discomfort to yourself

It's OK to be nervous. It's not OK to scowl, shuffle your feet, talk to your slides, keep your eyes fixed on only one person, race through your presentation or frequently look at the clock. If you're uncomfortable, you will make your audience uncomfortable and they will be less likely to listen to what you have to say.

Speak to be heard

When you speak, you're on. Even if it's a small meeting, you want to project so that your voice is strong and authoritative. I've worked with many people who are soft-spoken and others who start out strong but trail off at the end of a sentence. I advise professionals to visualize a person in the back of the room straining to hear you. Speak to that person in an effort to better project and, whenever possible, stand up to maximize the richness of your voice.

If you stop and think about it, you can probably recall a couple of memorable business presentations. What is it that you remember? What did they have in common? Chances are these presenters were personable and energetic. They were able to quickly get to the point and clearly address audience concerns. And, while they likely rehearsed their well-thought-out, organized, prepared remarks repeatedly, they probably made you feel as if they were simply speaking off-the-cuff for your benefit. ■



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