

"I KNOW WHAT SCARES YOU."

BY PETER COUGHTER
Professor - Presentation Skills



In an issue devoted to Fear, about a business, or rather the pursuit of an education in the ways of this business, it falls to me to write about what for many people is the greatest of all fears. And not just with regard to the business of advertising. According to many surveys, among all Americans it is truly the greatest of all fears. And what's that? Public Speaking. Presenting. Speaking in front of others. Call it what you will. It's number one on the Fear Charts. **AHEAD OF EVERYTHING ELSE. NUMBER ONE WITH A BULLET. AHEAD OF, THAT'S RIGHT, DEATH.**

It's my job to teach Adcenter students to become better presenters. It's important to be a good presenter for many reasons, not the least of which is this: it's critical to getting your work produced. It's not uncommon for ad people to spend three weeks developing a concept and three minutes thinking about how to sell it. That just doesn't make any sense to me.

As I speak with agency principals around the country about their people, the most common lament I hear is the lack of folks with the ability to successfully present their ideas.

In order to help students become better presenters, I thought I ought to find out if they shared the same basic American Fear. So I asked some of them, and here's what they said:

"I'D BE MORE COMFORTABLE PRESENTING SOMETHING THAT SOMEONE ELSE WROTE INSTEAD OF ME. I'M MORE NERVOUS ABOUT WHAT I'M SAYING THAN I AM ABOUT BEING IN FRONT OF PEOPLE."

"THE WHOLE THING MAKES ME UNCOMFORTABLE BECAUSE THE AUDIENCE SEES THAT I'M UNCOMFORTABLE AND THAT MAKES THEM UNCOMFORTABLE, AND I TRY TO AVOID THAT."

"I DON'T LIKE THE ATTENTION."

"IT'S TOO MUCH PRESSURE."

"I'M AFRAID OF FAILING OR BEING BORING."

"EVERYONE LOOKING AT ME TERRIFIES ME—THEY'RE JUDGING ME."

"I CAN'T MAKE EYE CONTACT WITH ANYONE. I GLAZE OVER AND EVERYTHING GOES WHITE. I DON'T SEE OR HEAR ANYBODY. I DON'T HEAR MYSELF SPEAKING OR ANYONE ELSE FOR THAT MATTER."

"HOW ABOUT DEATH, IS PRESENTING WORSE?" I ASKED. "YEAH, I'M NOT AFRAID OF DYING."

YIKES.

SO WHAT DO WE SAY TO THAT?

First, it's important to understand that your audience wants you to succeed. They're on your side. They didn't come to the meeting hoping it would stink. When was the last time you chose a movie hoping that it was bad? It's the same with presentations. People want them to be good. They're pulling for you, because they have the same fear you do, and they're delighted that it's you up there and not them. **SO USE THE ADRENALINE THAT'S RELEASED INTO YOUR SYSTEM TO PROPEL YOU FORWARD, TO FILL YOU WITH ENTHUSIASM FOR YOUR SUBJECT AND APPRECIATION FOR YOUR AUDIENCE. LET IT GET YOU "UP." WELCOME THE NERVES AND LET THEM MAKE YOUR PERFORMANCE BETTER.** Remember that everyone gets them. It's how you deal with them that counts.

PREPARATION AND REHEARSAL ARE THE BEST CURE FOR NERVES. If you know your stuff, if you've made it a part of you, you have nothing to fear. In fact, there have even been scientific studies on the subject which indicate that proper preparation and rehearsal will reduce nerves by 75% and increase the likelihood of avoiding errors by 95%. I have no idea how anybody measured that. But I read it on the Internet, so it must be true.

SO REHEARSE, REHEARSE, REHEARSE. Know your stuff. It's the best insurance against failure, and all it costs is a little time. Invest sufficient time to successfully present the work in which you've already invested countless hours.

BUT DON'T MEMORIZE. If you have a particularly cool opening or close that is critical to the presentation, you might memorize that, but no more than that. If you try to memorize the whole thing you're just setting yourself up for another reason to panic—the inevitable moment when you forget where you are. So don't memorize, besides when you do, it comes off that way. Make the ideas yours. **MAKE THE PRESENTATION A PART OF YOU AND SHARE IT AS IF YOU WERE HAVING A CONVERSATION WITH A FRIEND.** This will result in a lot less anxiety for you and your audience.

Remember that anxiety and tension are much less noticeable to the audience than they are to you. Countless times over the years I've heard presenters say that they were "shaking like a leaf," but when I ask the audience if they seemed nervous the answer is always "no."

And don't forget to breathe. It sounds funny, I know, but many students just grab a quick gulp of air and charge into their spiel, hoping to get the ordeal over with as quickly as possible. This, of course, doesn't work. And results in the pitch of their voice becoming higher and higher, as if they've been sucking on helium, while they eventually run out of air.

SO RELAX, BREATHE AND HAVE FUN, KNOWING THAT YOU'RE PREPARED AND IN CONTROL. And if that doesn't work, remember what Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "no one can intimidate me without my permission." Does anyone reading this magazine have any idea who Eleanor Roosevelt was? Maybe if I'd attributed the quote to Hillary Clinton...

A few years ago, at the end of a Presentation Skills Workshop I was doing for an agency in southern California, a very accomplished writer who had been in the group came up to me with her hand extended. I took it in mine, and she said, "Thank you so much. I'm not afraid anymore." **IF YOU PRACTICE THE THINGS WE'VE TALKED ABOUT HERE, YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE AFRAID ANYMORE EITHER.**