

REACHING THE PINNACLE OF PRESENTING SKILL

TAKES DEDICATION, PRACTICE AND TIME, BUT IT'S WELL WORTH THE EFFORT. AND THE VIEW FROM UP THERE IS EXTRAORDINARY.

Tony Jeary has just asked everyone in the room to write down an estimate of the number of presentations they give each week.

"How many of you said one or two?" he asks, raising his hand. A few hands pop up. "Three, four, six, eight?" he asks, walking up the middle of the aisle to the back of the room. Hands start popping up like targets in a shooting gallery. Jeary's Texas drawl accelerates and suddenly the place sounds like a cattle auction. "Do I hear 10? Twelve? Thirteen to the woman in the green shirt! Fifteen to the gentleman in plaid," he fires, and the room busts out laughing. The auctioneer bit is a masterful touch; Jeary sounds like a pro.

And he is — not of auctioneering, but of presentation skills. Jeary's audience may not even be aware of it, but they are in the hands of a master — a presentation master — someone who is operating at the top of their skill level, bringing all the elements of their knowledge and experience together in front of an audience, saying and doing everything right, and making it all look as easy and natural as a conversation with a friend.

The next big thing?

What Jeary is in fact practicing is a discipline he calls Presentation Mastery, a term Jeary didn't just coin, he trademarked it as well. His book on the subject is due out later this year, which will amplify the core principles of Presentation Mastery laid out in Jeary's latest book, *Life Is a Series of Presentations* (Simon & Schuster, 2004). Indeed, to hear Jeary tell it, Presentation Mastery is the "next big thing" in personal and corporate communications — a concept that essentially defines what it means to be a black belt in the presentation arts, and lays out a structured, disciplined approach for ordinary people to achieve this rarified level of presentation excellence.

"I believe that presentation effectiveness is one of the most overlooked aspects of professional life," says Jeary, who coaches executives from Wal-Mart, Ford, Black

& Decker and other Fortune 500 companies at his Success Acceleration Studio in Dallas. "Every time you interact with someone, whether it's by phone or e-mail or in the hall, is a presentation opportunity, and we miss making the most of those opportunities all the time."

Back in the room, what Jeary is really asking the participants to do is define their "presentation universe." This doesn't mean just the number of formal presentations a person does for work, it includes all sorts of interactions — networking, phone calls, e-mail, impromptu meetings, disputes with neighbors, conversations with real-estate brokers, social dates, etc. — in which they, the presenter, have a vested interest in the outcome.

"A presentation master achieves the majority of his or her desired outcomes almost all the time," says Jeary, and the closer a person gets to mastery, "the more likely their personal and professional lives will unfold successfully."

Suddenly, the people in the room are realizing that they don't do just three or four presentations a week, they really do hundreds of vari-

PRESENTATION

MASTERY

MASTERY

BY TAD SIMONS

ous types of presentations. And these aren't just presentations anymore, they are *lost opportunities for success!*

Jeary now has them right where he wants them.

No room for accidents

It didn't happen by accident, though. Having people write down the number of presen-

tations they give in a week (instead of having them just shout it out) was a way to get their bodies involved — what Jeary calls a “kinesthetic” exercise. Jeary purposely walked up the aisle, all the way to the back of the room, to break down the natural barrier between speaker and audience. And that auctioneer

riff? Jeary didn't improvise it, he spent six weeks at an auctioneer school learning the machine-gun syntax of auctioneering, and practiced for countless hours to get it right. In fact, Jeary has at his disposal at any given moment a vast storehouse of skills, stories, anecdotes, icebreakers, exercises, quotes, gimmicks

and pieces of wisdom he's been collecting for the past 20 years.

“I read a book a week and write up a one-page summary on the important points, which I keep in a file,” Jeary says, explaining the method in his madness. “I keep 3 x 5 cards all over the place in case I have an idea I want to write down. If I'm in church and the pastor tells a good joke or says something worth remembering, I write it down in my PDA.”

For the master-in-training, developing such habits is essential, Jeary says, because “all of these little habits are the building blocks of mastery. They aren't necessarily difficult, but they are important.”

What makes a master?

Of course, Tony Jeary isn't the only person who talks about or who has achieved Presentation Mastery. There are hundreds of people on the National Speakers Association's roster who qualify, for instance, and perhaps thousands of people in various disciplines all over the country who could credibly be called presentation masters. But the inverse is just as true: The vast majority of people are not presentation masters.

By definition, a *master* is someone who has achieved a level of expertise above and beyond that of most other people. But precisely what distinguishes a “presentation master” from an average or good presenter? What do they do differently? How did they learn their secrets? And is it possible for a nonprofessional speaker to reach such lofty heights?

Jim Cathcart is a highly respected professional speaker now, but he was once a clerk in a real-estate office who had no idea what he wanted to do with his life. In 1972, a radio address given by Earl Nightengale, the god-

FOUR SIGNPOSTS ON THE ROAD TO MASTERY

Presentation Mastery is a skill, and, like any other skill, learning it requires going through four distinct stages, or “competencies” as they are known in training and education circles. These are:

UNCONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

You don't even know what a presentation is, or why you should care about improving your skills in this area.

CONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

You are aware of presentation skills enough to know that other people have them, but you don't. Recognizing this is the first step toward learning.

CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

You have learned some basics and are now putting them into practice. However, you must still pay lots of attention to mechanics and delivery, and you only apply certain skills selectively. (Most people fall into this category.)

UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

You have assimilated the skills necessary for maximum effectiveness at the podium and do them out of habit, almost automatically. You are now on the road to Presentation Mastery.

Adapted from Life Is a Series of Presentations, by Tony Jeary (Simon & Schuster, 2004).

father of the human-potential movement, inspired Cathcart.

“One thing Nightengale said was that if you study anything an hour a day for five years, you can be a national expert on it,” recalls Cathcart. Professional development and human potential interested Cathcart, so he began to study it with an eye toward becoming an expert. When he started his speaking career, though, Cathcart admits he faced two obstacles that tend to work against public speakers: “I had never given a speech and I had nothing to say.”

Thirty-two years later, Cathcart is a member of the NSA’s Speakers Hall of Fame, a recipient of the Toastmasters Golden Gavel, and one of the most respected professional speakers working today. If he

could do it, he says, anyone can. But if you ask Cathcart what separates him from the rest of presenting pack, his answer is deceptively simple: “Put the *why* before the *how*, and manage your *intent*, not your *content*.”

Cathcart sells hundreds of books, tapes and seminars that expound on those axioms, of course, but the nut of mastery for Cathcart is first figuring out why an audience cares about what you have to say, then making sure everything you say and do flows from that point of view.

What mastery is — and isn’t
“Platform masters are not people who fret for hours over their content,” says Cathcart. “They don’t spend their time tweaking their PowerPoint slides — masters spend their

time researching their audience or clients, learning what’s important to them, and reflecting on how their message is going to make sense to the people in their audience.”

In a similar vein, Jerry Cahn, president of the New York City-based consulting firm Presentation Excellence, says the biggest mistake non-master presenters make is focusing on the components of a presentation, rather than the entire experience.

“Mastery is really about harnessing all the power of a particular medium and combining it with the skills, technique and intelligence to reach a specific communication goal,” explains Cahn. “There are many different pieces to it, and most coaches will tell their clients that they have to integrate these pieces.

But integration of skills and technique only takes you so far; it doesn’t get you to mastery. If you try to integrate a bunch of body parts, for example, what you get is Frankenstein. Mastery is more like a model, a holistic and beautiful whole.”

According to Lee Velta, director of instruction and design for New York City-based Communispond, one of the world’s largest speaking/consultant companies, “If someone gets up and talks for an hour without stopping, people will usually think the speaker is pretty good, just because they kept the words coming. In the higher dimension of mastery, the trick is saying the right words in the right way to achieve a specific goal or action.”

But even that description is a bit mechanical, says Velta, because a master presenter is also someone who has the ability to transform an audience, almost alchemically, through a seemingly magical mix of knowledge, skill and charisma.

“Masters are often able to establish a deep, personal connection with an audience by having the confidence to be genuinely open and honest, even vulnerable,” he says. “It may be planned, or happen spontaneously, but a master will often take what I call a deep, personal risk — with a story or an anecdote or response to a question — that opens up a whole new dimension. It’s mastery because if you can do it, if you can connect that deeply, you can take the group to an entirely different place.”

Getting there from here

Unfortunately, getting to that place isn’t easy, and there aren’t many shortcuts. Everyone takes a different path, but the starting point is similar.

“The only way to become a

I DON’T HAVE TIME FOR THIS

One of the biggest obstacles on the road to presentation mastery for most people is that it takes a tremendous amount of time to accomplish. But according to Tony “Mr. Presentation” Jeary, opportunities to improve are everywhere, and they don’t necessarily have to eat up your day.

“You can practice your presentation skills any time you interact with another person,” says Jeary. “Before you make a phone call, take a minute or two to think about what you’re going to say. Before a meeting, take five or 10 minutes to organize your thoughts. When you tell a joke to a friend, try to tell it as well as you can and keep a mental note on how you did and what you could do better. When you leave a phone message, speak clearly and pay attention to the tone and pace of your voice. At parties, remind yourself to repeat people’s names and listen carefully. You’d be surprised how much difference these little things can make.”

master presenter is to decide to become one, then invest your energy and resources into developing your skills,” says Presentation Excellence’s Cahn. “It’s like anything else: You start by defining your strengths and weaknesses, then build on your strengths and minimize your weaknesses.”

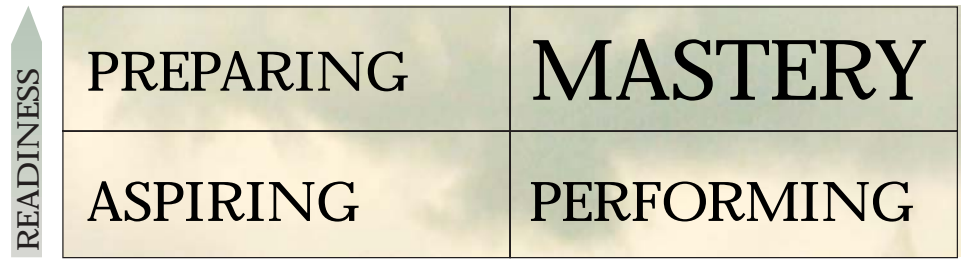
Time in the saddle isn’t as important as you might think, however. Plenty of sales people spend their entire professional lives making presentations without getting close to mastery. What matters more, say those who have made the climb, is passion, commitment and perseverance.

“Step one is awareness that such a thing as mastery exists, and that it is reachable,” says Tony Jeary. “Then people have to do a brutally honest assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. That’s where a good coach can help. Then it’s a matter of establishing a development plan, laying a foundation of solid skills, and building on that foundation. You can’t just think about it, though — you have to *do* it, and you have to *want* to do it.”

Why most presenters never achieve mastery

You can be sure that Tony Jeary, Jim Cathcart, Jerry Cahn, Lee Velta and anyone else you care to name who has mastered the art of presentation, has walked these same coals. The problem facing most presenters who want to improve is deciding where to start and exactly what to work on. That’s where Jeary’s Presentation Mastery framework comes in handy.

Jeary breaks down the skills-development cycle into four different components — aspiring, preparing, performing and mastery — all of which are plotted on a graph according to one’s degree of readiness (subject knowledge, audience research, technical



DELIVERY

FIGURE 1 Every presenter’s goal should be to move from “aspiring” to “mastery.” The first step, according to Tony Jeary, is to do an honest assessment of your skills to find out where you land in the above readiness/delivery scale.

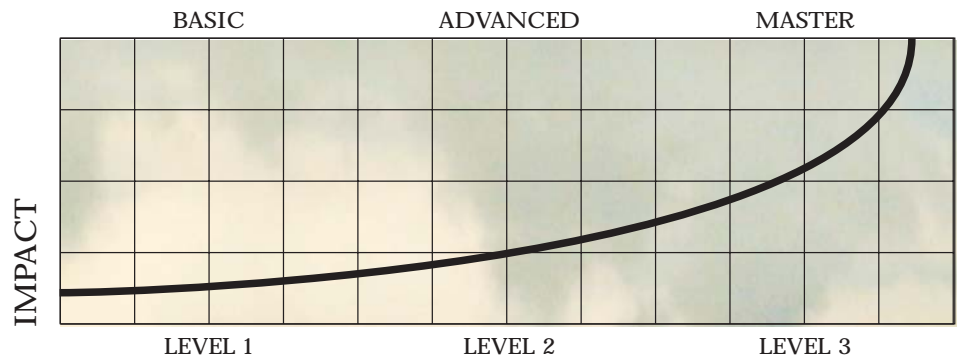


FIGURE 2 Once the climb to mastery begins, incremental results are seen from basic skills to advanced. Once you start entering the realm of Master, however, the benefits begin to accrue exponentially.

skill, etc.) and expertise in delivery (body movement, mechanics, voice, pacing, humor, etc.). (See FIGURE 1.) According to Jeary, everyone falls somewhere on this scale. New presenters tend to start in the box on the lower left of FIGURE 1, with plenty of aspiration but poor preparation and shaky delivery. More-seasoned presenters usually lean in one of two directions: their preparation is good but their delivery is uneven, or their delivery is smooth but their preparation could use work. The goal, of course, is to move into the Mastery box in the upper right, where stellar preparation and delivery skills combine to produce Presentation Mastery.

“Most people never reach mastery,” says Jeary. “They only develop their skills to a point at which they are comfortable, then they plateau. What they don’t realize is that even an incremental improve-

ment in their presentation skills can yield tremendous dividends.”

In Jeary’s framework, the benefits of presentation-skills development can be plotted on the Presentation Impact Curve (FIGURE 2). On the journey from Basic (Level I) to Advanced (Level II), small advances yield relatively incremental improvements in impact. Dramatic results are not instantaneous, but they do accumulate and, eventually, begin to multiply. The work really begins to pay off in Level III, in which, Jeary says, “incremental improvements start to yield exponential results.”

Changing the shape of your life

There are, of course, different kinds of presentations — from sales calls to wedding toasts — for any number of purposes (motivating, persuading, informing, celebrating, leading, etc.). From the master’s viewpoint, however,

they all require a similar application of skills.

Communispond’s Velta explains: “A master presenter has a profound understanding of their content and delivery, whatever direction it needs to go, and whatever action needs to take place. A master understands their content and skills so thoroughly that they can adapt them for just about any situation.”

Investing the time and effort necessary to achieve such an exalted level of presentation skill can have, according to Jeary, “a profound impact on the shape of your life.” Think about it: your success in life really depends on how you approach the millions of opportunities that come your way. Presentation mastery, more than any other skill, can help you make the most of them. ■

Tad Simons is editor-in-chief of Presentations.