

Presentations That Pack A Punchline

Comedy courses teach participants to successfully apply improv and humour to selling situations.

M

ark Napier had two weeks to prepare for a panel discussion at an industry event. Since the discussion was to be held in front of several hundred people, and his peers and clients would be in the audience, he knew he would have to be in top form. Given the spontaneous, unscripted nature of the panel, Napier decided to get professional help: improvisation training courses offered by comedy companies.

In the end, the courses made a world of difference.

"I feel that my presentations are more like a conversation with the audience now instead of a stiff speech," says Napier, Systems Strategy Manager for U.S.-based Bovis Lend Lease Inc. "[My division] presents to large corporate clients [and] now I can draw from my new toolbox of skills and concentrate on getting the right message to my audience."

More and more sales professionals are seeking out new ways to break out of old routines. And while it may seem like an unlikely place to start, the corporate training courses offered by local comedy companies apply the fundamentals of improv and comedy to the business world, and teach participants how to refine their speaking and listening skills.

Participants learn how to become more powerful speakers; how to listen to and read an audience; and when to use humour effectively – thus gaining more confidence in their presenting abilities. Emphasis is also placed on teaching people how to adapt to change and respond in the moment.

The training is customized to the client's needs, with themes and topics ranging from high-stakes presentations to conflict resolution to interviewing workshops. Courses generally have no more than 12 to 15 participants, and can be taken by pre-existing groups, such as a sales team, or individuals. They're geared toward making participants think differently.

Richard Peterson, President of Peterson and Associates, a Toronto-based corporate training company, has noticed an increase in demand for these intangible skills. He believes focusing on them can have an overall impact on a salesperson's career.

"I've had folks come to me who feel they are stuck in their career," says Peterson, who is himself a Certified Sales Professional. "I think individuals have realized that unless a person is recognized as a strong communicator, they are not likely recognized as a leader – they're not recognized as someone who has career abilities to go into management levels."

Course trainers teach methods and help build confidence by working with the participant's natural strengths.

"It's all the soft skills you didn't learn in business school," says Tom Yorton, the Director of Corporate Services for Second City in Toronto and Chicago. "By doing it in a safe and protected way, they learn that it isn't so bad – it is certainly within them to be able to speak with their particular style. There's a host of exercises where people gradually get more comfortable."

Peterson says salespeople often just need a fresh approach. Many times the same presentation is used over and over, and it can begin to sound dry and routine. Some rely too heavily on tools such as PowerPoint. Some may be with a company for years and model their presentations after the ones they've observed within that setting, and never consider an alternative.

"It's what I call internal business conditioning," Peterson says. "We don't have outside exposure to other presentations, and typically we don't have any evaluation or critiquing afterward."

The courses move away from a formulaic approach to presentations, and encourage participants to use their natural strengths and to think on their feet.

Answering audience questions was an ability Napier improved while in the course. Each participant stood in front of the class while the group suggested rapid-fire phrases or subjects, and the presenter had to react quickly.

"Surprisingly, this revealed to us that we can almost always relate some past experience or bit of knowledge to just about anything that is thrown our way," Napier says. "Once you realize this, you become much more confident in your ability to field impromptu questions."

Although the courses are offered through comedy companies, Peterson and Yorton are both quick to point out that it's not about learning how to tell jokes.

"Improv-based methods are really less about comedy and being funny than they are about becoming a good improviser," Yorton says. "It's a slight distinction, but it's important. Many aren't really aware of how improv works, and how those things really make sense in a typical business interaction."

Using the natural apprehension in an audience is an essential tool that Peterson teaches. He noticed many of his clients came to him because they wanted to make their presentations more memorable, and to learn how to use humour more effectively.

"There is such a thing as business humour and it's not about developing snappy one-liners, but it's developing humour particularly in selling situations where there is the element of fear to start off with," he says.

Trainers recognize that in many selling situations, fear naturally exists in both the presenter and the audience. The fear of speaking in public is often one of the first issues dealt with in the sessions.

"I can't think of anything more nerve-wracking than public speaking," Peterson says. "I've seen the surveys that talk about our top fears... No. 5 is fear of dying, and No. 1 is a fear of speaking in public. So technically, a person would rather die than have to speak in front of people."

For those participants who are not comfortable speaking publicly, techniques are taught to not only overcome the fear, but to use it so it actually benefits the presentation. Napier found that after much evaluation and feedback, his fear subsided. "It gave me the confidence to speak in front of large groups and removed most of the anxiety from public speaking," he says.

Peterson also teaches clients how to use the natural tension in the room to their advantage by applying a basic of improv.



Tom Yorton, Second City



Richard Peterson,
Peterson and Associates

“Humour is a powerful tension releaser. The element of comedy is to raise the curiosity, raise the tension and [then] release the tension. The release is called the punchline. It’s the same with [business] presentations.” he says. “[The release] is the [subsequent] calm period, where you can then have the conversation continue.”

And when this conversation takes place, it becomes easier to reach the ultimate goal of agreement, Peterson explains. “When you’re in a selling context, it’s all about finding a way to get to agreement with the person on the other side of the desk,” he says.

Yorton also stresses that “humour is in service of the message,” and that it shouldn’t be used as an end in and of itself. “If you have potential clients, and they’ve given you some precious time, you’d better make sure that whatever humour you’re using is in service of the goal of the meeting and the presentation,” he adds.

Peterson also concentrates on getting students to shake old habits, and ensuring their tools contribute to achieving the goal. “I call it the PowerPoint diet,” he says. Peterson noticed during his 18 years of sales experience that “it was almost a badge of honour to have the most slides.” Now, during his training sessions, he makes people justify each slide, and prove why it should stay in the presentation.


Napier says he certainly learned to use his presentation tools more effectively, and became aware of how his behaviour onstage can add or take away from a presentation. “I learned that beginning with a strong declaration of confidence – for example, approaching the podium with confidence – sets the stage for a powerful presentation. Approaching in a timid fashion makes it difficult to recover and gain the audience’s respect.”

That increased sense of confidence and awareness of the audience are two vital elements that clients take away with them, things that Yorton says can contribute to more overall success.

“They will have improved their ability to listen and read a room and their awareness of what’s going on around them,” Yorton says. “They will be able to find, especially in a selling context, the fundamental tenant of improv is ... the principle of agreement where people can exchange ideas and heighten each other’s ideas by agreeing with them.”

ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR PRESENTERS

- 1. Don't wing it.** It may seem obvious — but rehearsing is essential. Richard Peterson, President of Toronto-based Peterson and Associates, claims “you will have an 80% advantage over your competitor in a selling situation if you rehearse your presentation once in real time beforehand.”
- 2. Know your audience.** While it takes more time to customize each presentation to each client, when you do, the difference is noticeable.
- 3. Have a back-up plan for when things go wrong.** Have additional copies of all presentation materials; know your equipment inside and out; and practice how you would deal with a technical problem.
- 4. Don't go over your time limit.** Consider the time given to you as a contract, and be sure to honour it.
- 5. Think carefully about your closing words.** They will have the final impact, and it may be what the audience remembers the most. Peterson suggests that as you “approach the end of your presentation, inform your

audience that you will address questions before moving to the closing point.” This will help to focus attention on your closing words. 

Comedyworks, Toronto

www.comedyworks.ca/workshops.html

Peterson and Associates, Toronto

www.passociates.com/meet_coach_richard.shtml

Second City, Toronto and Chicago

www.secondcity.com/corporate/index.asp

The Institution, Ottawa

www.theinstitution.com/corporate.htm

Web Sources