Secrets from the Pros:
5 Master Presenters Share Their Top Techniques

By DAVE ZIELINSKI

Every time Gen. Colin Powell steps up to a microphone, he earns more than $50,000. Nancy Austin, along with A Passion for Excellence co-author Tom Peters, has turned her presentation skills into a cottage industry catering to fast-thinking, forward-looking executives.

What do these people know about presenting that you don't? Not much -- yet each has developed a personal cache of secret strategies and techniques that have helped them become the successful presenters they are today. How did they develop these techniques and what can you learn from them?

To find out, Presentations magazine researched the dossiers of five master presenters, all of whom are considered experts in their respective specialties. From large-group keynote speakers to small-group trainers and motivators, each has a briefcase full of proven presentation strategies that you, too, can use to improve your effectiveness on the podium.

To add these secrets to your speaking arsenal, simply read the following profiles -- then destroy this magazine. If these secrets get into enemy hands, the competition may blow you out of the water.

Profile 1

Name: Chip Bell
Employer: Performance Research Associates Inc., Dallas
Position: Senior partner
Profile: Annually logs more than 150,000 air miles delivering 100-plus speeches to organizations and conferences on ways to create long-term customer loyalty and developing managers as mentors.
Preferred visuals: Handouts
Secret strategy: Arrives early to meet and greet the audience, perfectly memorizes the first three minutes of his talk, mixes hard data with anecdotes, uses simple hard-copy visuals to avoid technology gaffs, approaches each presentation as a mutual learning experience with the audience.

When he started out, Chip Bell read every book he could on giving presentations, listened to tapes of renowned speakers, practiced often in front of a mirror, and listened to himself on audiotape, since video wasn't yet readily available. Then he began speaking anywhere and everywhere -- for free -- to hone his craft. "I gave away freebies
to Rotary groups, churches, the Chamber of Commerce — you name it," he says. "I also
team-presented with other speakers to get their ideas, tips and feedback."

Pre-speech: Getting into the spirit of greatness

Integral to his pre-speech mindset, Bell says, is advice received long ago from a training
colleague: "You've got to get yourself into the spirit of greatness."

Although others may get into that spirit via alone time in front of a mirror, or by isolating
themselves with notes to get centered and focused, Bell prefers to arrive early at his
presentation site to meet and greet participants. It's not unusual for him to personally
greet all 1,000 members of an audience. "For me it builds early rapport and creates an
environment where they're no longer strangers."

In speech openings, Bell invokes another time-honored maxim. "You've got to know
your first three minutes cold. Have an opening you can get through perfectly, even if
you're half asleep or sick as a dog," he says. "It frees you to focus on getting your
rhythm and pacing, and to build a rapport with the audience, instead of worrying about
content."

Bell also fuels up on air before hitting the stage. "A few deep breaths send oxygen
streaming into your bloodstream, slowing your heart and calming you."

Finding the right mix of hard data and stories

Anyone who's seen Bell speak knows he's a master storyteller. Yet he knows good
storytelling requires more than just having an ear for the dramatic or a compelling
delivery. "Some audiences require a bigger dose of hard facts, data or statistics fairly
early in the presentation -- you need that foundation to establish credibility before you
can use stories," he says.

To wit: Bell spoke recently to a group of cardiologists on the value of customer service --
not an easy sell to a group measured and rewarded more on efficiency and outcomes
than on their patient hand- holding. To this audience, providing more personal attention
meant they'd probably see fewer patients and notice the fallout on the bottom line. Says
Bell, "In order to get them past that, I had to first provide some hard, compelling data
about the dollar impact of great customer service -- how repeat business, customer
retention and word-of-mouth pay off. Only then were they ready to hear a related story."

Handouts are simple, but powerful

Rather than use slides or computer-driven visuals, Bell prefers to put what might
otherwise be projected onscreen into workbooks or hard- copy handouts for his
audiences.
His rationale? Many popular AV tools create an unnecessary barrier between presenter and audience, he claims. "Anytime you use AV, it creates a formality and distance you have to factor in. Supporting media can increase retention by stimulating more senses, but I'll trade that for a more personal rapport with the audience."

By putting charts, graphs or related data in handouts and referring to them during the speech, Bell says it also "frees me not to think about having to push buttons and manipulate media, which means I can put more energy into the audience."

Not to say he isn't a fan of PowerPoint -- he often uses the software to create easy-to-read handouts.

Bell believes plenty of presenters would be left gasping for air if their life support -- AV systems -- were disabled. "There's a reason they're called visual 'aids.' They're designed as support tools, not as the centerpiece."

Avoid the 'O Great One' syndrome

The trait that most unnerves Bell in other presenters is the attitude of "All Hail, The Expert. The Mighty One is here to enlighten the Little People."

"The late Malcolm Knowles (known as the father of adult learning and author of the seminal book, The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species) taught me years ago that the most important trait of a presenter is that sense of humility that says, 'I am here as a fellow traveler and we are going to learn together,' " says Bell. "It's the attitude of, 'I may have something I can share with you that you don't know but, likewise, you have things to share that can educate me, too.' We have to remember, good presentations are a partnership, not a monologue."

Profile 2

**Name:** Carolyn Balling  
**Employer:** Collagen Corp., Palo Alto, Calif.  
**Position:** Manager of internal training  
**Profile:** Manages internal training at a biomedical company and has own training consulting business. A top small-group presenter in the training field, known for delivering energetic, informative sessions at national conferences. Teaches presentation-skills at U.C.-Berkeley. Author of *Fit to Train: How to Succeed at Training Delivery (Without Really Tiring).*  
**Preferred visuals:** Overhead transparencies  
**Secret strategy:** Does "needs assessment" of early arrivers, uses audience participation, leverages the flexibility of overheads, avoids clichés.
Balling often delivers presentation skills training, and she gives all of her students one early piece of advice: Act like you own the room and soon enough you will.

"I want them to act like they're in charge, because even if they don't quite feel that confident yet, acting will help give them that sense," she says. That doesn't mean being cocky or territorial, but rather behaving "more like a host welcoming guests to a friendly place."

Balling videotapes students to assess how they move during presentations. She does it to prove to her students that "they can move around and talk effectively to the audience at the same time -- and to reassure them it's OK to do so."

Take advantage of early arrivals

Chatting up early arrivals before a presentation has advantages, Balling says. "It helps me connect with them and learn a few names, but it also allows me to do a quick needs assessment to uncover some of their expectations for the session."

Balling's not a big fan of presenters who lurk in the shadows until they're formally introduced. "I find it a bit incongruous if you act as though you're invisible before the presentation, even though everyone knows who you are. Then, the moment you start presenting, you flip a switch and become welcoming and friendly."

Laser-lock on the audience to quell self-consciousness

The secret to powerful presentations is focusing on the audience, she says. "As soon as the presenter or trainer makes the switch to being more concerned for the people in the seats than about themselves, that's where the magic starts to happen. When people let go of themselves, stop thinking about the way they look or sound, and become more invested in what the trainee learns or audience takes away, they become more powerful presenters."

For small groups, overheads still rule

Balling calls herself the "queen of low-tech." While computer-driven presentations can offer more visual pizzazz and cutting-edge flavor, she's not convinced they contribute significantly to learning outcomes in training situations.

"I still prefer overheads because they're so dynamic -- you can change your mind or shift directions on a dime to match audience needs or follow where the class conversation is heading," she says.

"All you have to do is move that overhead forward. You don't have to say, 'Now, don't watch these,' as you go clicking by with your computer presentation. And if you're running out of time, only you know which overheads you're skipping over, not your audience. Your on-the-fly changes are invisible."
Overheads also are unbeatable for small-group interaction, she says. "I gather a lot of information from people in my sessions, constantly writing on overheads what they're saying, filling in blanks, doing things you just can't do with a static, pre-packaged tool."

The icing, she says, is that overheads are among the easiest AV tools to pack and travel with "and you don't have to worry about a technology meltdown during your presentation."

When you're not talking about it, get rid of it.

"Turn off or cover up the overhead, flip the flip chart page, get rid of the slides when you're not using them -- don't compete with yourself," Balling says. "Don't force people to read and listen to you at the same time. Keep the focus on you."

There's nothing worse than a false smoothie

Balling has two pet peeves: Speakers who are more concerned about being polished than being real. "Presenters who strive for seamless delivery and body language, with set places for the emotive story -- "here's a good place to have them tear up" -- do not have a learning conversation with the audience. They sound more like a live audiotape."

These speakers would be better served to focus more on language and original content, she says. "In the end, what the audience really cares about is whether you were thought-provoking and interesting."

Using stories everyone's heard before "as if they've happened to them personally." Better to be honest, says Balling, "and preface it with, 'Here's a story I've always liked that relates to this...' and don't try to personalize it."

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Profile 3

Name: Nancy Austin  
Position: Writer, speaker, president of Nancy K. Austin Inc.  
Profile: With Tom Peters co-authored best-selling A Passion for Excellence, (1985). Authority on how leaders can build enduring, flexible organizations, create healthy corporate cultures and foster innovation. Speaks to groups both large and small in more than a dozen countries on six continents. Columnist, contributing editor for Inc. magazine since 1997.  
Preferred visuals: 35mm slides.
**Secret strategy**: Rehearse frequently, get colleague feedback, research audience to customize presentation, use high-quality photos for visual imagery, use "I" to personally connect.

Nancy Austin says the best speech-rehearsal tactic for her remains simple repetition. "Nothing else is even close," she says. She refuses, however, to watch herself on videotape as a way to improve, citing the benefits of "selective inattention."

"There are certain things you don't want to know too much about," she says. "I have the kind of mind that once that video image gets in my head, it's there forever... there are things I see on tape that are difficult to shake off or change."

Instead, she regularly solicits feedback from other respected speakers -- colleague Tom Peters chief among them -- to hone her platform skills, but has stopped short of hiring a professional presentation-skills coach. While she believes coaches can help beginning presenters in some areas, "the danger is that their clients will start to look and sound alike. It's important we retain our own styles."

If the passion is gone, you should be, too

Many of Austin's speeches feature an unchanging set of themes, rooted in basic research and experiences she's had over the years, but tailored to express current business conditions. She knows it's as critical for her as it is for her audiences to keep things fresh. "I need to have enough new or customized content each time so it's invigorating for me, as well as for the audience," Austin says.

Lack of such passion limits many a presentation. "The best thing any presenter can do is try to talk only about those things they really care about, that elicit passion and sense of purpose," she says. "Absence of that is difficult to hide."

Expect -- and plan for -- the unexpected

When you speak often enough, the extraordinary becomes ordinary. Austin recently was asked to speak to a large association. Before she took the podium, the host announced that the association's director, who had died a few days before of presumed natural causes, had in fact committed suicide because he'd embezzled money from the association. "They decided the best time to announce this is right before I walk up there," recalls Austin. "There I am onstage, facing his widow in the front row, and an audience that is stunned and hardly prepared to focus on my content. It was a disaster."

Such scenarios are why Austin now regularly checks in with clients for a status report a few days before speaking.

Learn to speak the audience's language
To research audiences, Austin looks at characteristics such as average age, company or industry hot-button issues, and geography. The latter because "different parts of the country can respond very differently to the same message."

To glean audience insights, she sends out short surveys, reads annual reports, company newsletters or magazines, and typically schedules a conference call with two or three key people from the group she's speaking to. "I want their input on my approach and whether they think it will fit. Everyone has particular expectations of you, but it can be difficult to get them to articulate that. You have to be persistent in getting that information out of them. I work hard on that."

Learning the audience's language, rather than forcing it to learn or adapt to hers, also is key. Compare her approach to speaking to a group of engineers on customer service concepts with her approach to a roomful of salespeople. "If I'm talking to engineers, I might talk a bit more about the technology of customer service, break it down and be more systematic about it," she says. "With salespeople, I would probably use more energetic, colorful, vivid language."

Visuals should be flexible and meltdown-free

Austin says many of her beliefs on the use of supporting visuals and presentation technologies are counterintuitive.

"From all the articles and advertisements you see today, you get the impression every presenter is walking around with all their data on a disk, simply popping it in a laptop and wham, away they go. But, my god, the potential problems."

Austin says she'd love to have her library of 500 slides on disk, select their running order with a click of a mouse, and then hand the whole thing over to an AV expert onsite.

"Unfortunately, that's making a number of assumptions I can't rely on, which is why I prefer slides," she says. "Slide projectors usually don't break down and more of the people I work with understand them (although on more than one occasion I've had to explain to AV people the difference between front and rear projection)."

She also prefers slides because they're versatile -- 70 percent of her slides feature high-quality photographs, offering flexibility in her commentary. And, because she rarely uses complex charts or graphs, she doesn't feel a need for the firepower of a computer-driven system.

Don't build an 'AV moat'

Austin believes a good many corporate presenters -- particularly CEOs and top execs -- use audiovisuals as protective armor or "moats" to separate them from their employee audiences.
"I would suggest to these people that they ditch the podium, ditch the teleprompters, ditch PowerPoint, ditch the slides and just talk face to face to their people, particularly during the times the company is going through upheaval or a difficult stretch," she says.

Executives and managers also would be well advised to make their internal presentations more personal, she says. It doesn't take much to get up and speak in the third person about your company ("This is what Acme Inc. is all about..."), but to be true leaders, execs need to talk more about what they think and feel. Not many CEOs are prepared to do that -- even when people's lives and careers are at stake.

Profile 4

**Name:** Hal Gordon  
**Employer:** Gen. Colin Powell  
**Position:** Speechwriter

**Profile:** Writes speeches, articles, op/ed columns and manages a Web page for Gen. Powell. Former White House speechwriter. Wrote as many as four speeches a week for President Reagan's budget director. Ghostwriter for top business executives nationwide, including Norman Augustine, former chairman and CEO of Lockheed-Martin Corp.

**Preferred visuals:** None used

**Secret strategy:** Spends time researching subject to find real and personal "insider" stories, emphasizes key points with humor when possible, gets additional mileage from initial effort by reusing basic presentation message in several mediums.

When it comes to creating speaker credibility, Hal Gordon says, there are no platform tricks.

"If you want your audience to believe you, you have to tell the truth. If you want them to believe that you really care about an issue, you have to speak from your own experience or from the depth of your own feelings."

Gen. Colin Powell is a perfect example of this belief. Stage presence, good diction and body language, practiced storytelling skills -- along with an arsenal of compelling "insider" stories -- all contribute to Powell's power as a speaker. But credibility makes it all possible, his chief wordsmith says.

The difference between political and corporate speechwriting

The chief difference is that in politics you're trying to sell an agenda, whereas in corporate speechwriting, "you're often trying to sell a product or service," Gordon says.
Politicians are more willing to appeal to emotion and share personal feelings and experiences in the course of a speech, he says. On the other hand, "most CEOs want to be seen as cool, rational, dispassionate and capable."

Above all, Gordon says, beware the CEO speech with the line, "this company is about people."

Go beyond the ordinary to find stories and anecdotes

Gordon believes the best stories are personal anecdotes you find "by interviewing and interacting with people, doing your own research, rather than thumbing through Platform Stories for All Occasions.

When Colin Powell tells a story, it's almost always from personal experience, Gordon says. "He very rarely uses quotes from others in his speeches." Powell likes to talk about his boyhood and family, and the challenges and problems young people face today. "He frequently talks about the experiences he has interacting with youngsters when he visits a school or a Boys and Girls Club around the country."

Use humor wisely and the audience will love it

Although it can be risky, Gordon is a great believer in using humor both for breaking the ice and illustrating the major points of a speech. One device he's seen corporate executives and politicians use with success: Opening their speeches by reading excerpts of a letter. "For example, a CEO might say, 'A customer wrote to me recently to praise/criticize our company for such-and-such. This letter goes to the heart of the message I want to leave with you.' " Or, says Gordon, some politicians prefer to get laughs -- and focus interest -- "by reading the hate mail some wacko sends them."

Recycling presentations: A missed opportunity

What's the biggest missed opportunity with regard to internal presentations? Gordon believes it's not getting enough mileage out of them. "Speeches take a lot of work to produce, and at the very least a major speech or presentation -- or some highlights of it -- should be posted to your company Web site, distributed on video, or turned into an article for external or internal publication, if applicable."

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Profile 5

Name: Kathy Reardon
Employer: University of Southern California School of Business, Los Angeles
Position: Professor of management
Profile: Expert on persuasion, negotiation and interpersonal communications in the workplace. Speaks more than 50 times a year. Has appeared on "Good Morning

**Preferred visuals:** PowerPoint slides

**Secret strategy:** Visualizes presentation success, uses PowerPoint to enhance important points, directs the audience's attention with key phrases.

Much like the world-class athlete who visualizes every aspect of an upcoming performance, Kathy Reardon says she uses pre-speech airplane time to "visually take myself through the speech."

She also finds pre-speech exercise valuable, often taking a short walk to clear her brain for a bit, forget about the presentation, then return just before the speech and briefly scan her notes. "Many of the best presenters I know are not terribly calm people, but they've learned how to channel that energy," she says. One way: Opt for a portable microphone that allows you to roam and release energy. "The act of walking and talking conveys energy, too," she says.

You can't be an expert on everything

Reardon's rule of thumb in choosing speaking engagements might seem obvious, but it's often abused: Speak on the subjects you know the most about.

"Because I'm in the field of communications, I'm often asked to speak on a very wide range of topics under that umbrella, some of which I'm just not the right person for," she says. She is candid about this with prospective clients. "If you want to become a superb speaker, it's imperative that you know what you do well -- and what you don't." Lack of depth is hard to camouflage, she points out, most notably in Q & A sessions.

**AV: Give them some relief from you**

Reardon believes that properly used AV serves two critical purposes: an appeal to several different learning styles and a needed change of pace. "It means some relief for the audience, because they aren't forced to listen to me constantly," especially in longer sessions.

She opts for PowerPoint over slides to avoid having to dim lights or fiddle with light switches. She'll use PowerPoint to project scenarios of men and women communicating at work, for instance, then ask the audience to comment on what might have enhanced the communication.

Despite her affinity for AV, she says there are plenty of pitfalls. If you're using slides, use them sparingly. Don't shoehorn 50 slides into a 30-minute sales pitch. Also, if you're in a selling situation, don't wait until that 20th slide or screen to get to your punch line or summary. Let them know your end game up front, then fill in the details with remaining
vials. The danger, of course, is getting so caught up in the data that you overlook the outcome you're trying to achieve.

Use 'signal' phrases to refocus interest

You can reasonably expect people to focus for only 15 to 20 minutes of a one-hour presentation. To increase these moments of true concentration when the mind doesn't wander, periodically use phrases like "this is absolutely fundamental" or "this is critical to my point" in order to draw the audience back in from their daydreams.

Always avoid the 'you people' syndrome

Reardon has done plenty of research on how credibility influences persuasion. While a perceived level of expertise is critical, so too is the concept of similarity in making audiences comfortable with you.

"That means the audience has to either sense that you are somewhat like them, or that you have a real understanding of their lives and what they're up against day to day," she says. "It's the sense that you can relate to them, and thus, they to you."

Know how people see you, then shatter their illusions

People spend most of their days making judgments and inferences rather than operating on fact and you can't expect your audiences to be any different, Reardon says. For that reason, it helps to understand how people perceive you, and stage pre-emptive strikes when needed.

Reardon was once asked to speak to a group in New York, and the conference host, when introducing her, mentioned that she didn't fit his image of a professor. "I was young and a woman to boot," Reardon says.

Her counter? "From chatting up some of the audience members before the speech, I sensed many probably had a similar perception of me, so I decided to just blast right through it. I spent the first five minutes giving them the best they'd ever heard on that particular topic, and tried to put all doubts to rest."

About the Author: Dave Zielinski is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer and editor.
Ever wonder how people like Ellen DeGeneres, Gary Vaynerchuk, and Tony Robbins are able to present so eloquently, personably, and easily? We've picked out six master presenters and broken down their best presentations to solve the riddles of what makes their technique and style so masterful.

Discover the top 5 interview techniques employers use to find the best candidate for the job. This blog post is a must-read for every HR professional who wants to learn about the latest trends in conducting job interviews and innovative, creative interview techniques.

Interviewing techniques for employers. There are many different types of job interviews and numerous different interviewing techniques. You've probably most familiar with the traditional job interview technique - you know, the one where you ask your candidates about their skills and experiences in order to find out if they're a good fit for your open job position. Traditional interviews come in many shapes and sizes. For example, a traditional interview can be structured, unstructured or semi-structured.