

# THE **BiG** **CHEESE**

Senior executives can't afford to have presentations skills that stink, but many do. Here's how to meet the challenge and come out smelling like a leader.

**BY JULIE HILL**

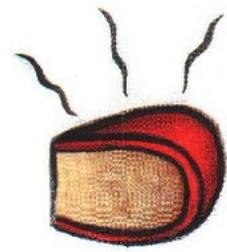
No matter the company, the people at the top are different — sort of. Their skills, knowledge and talents have put them in positions to lead and inspire, but that doesn't mean they can or will. And although the biggest cheeses usually get a hefty salary, a nice office and a competent staff, they aren't immune to the most common challenges of presenting: anxiety, lack of preparation time, nervous tics, off-message rambling and misreading an audience.

In fact, many top executives tread these familiar waters — and rougher presentation seas — precisely *because* they are captain of the ship. With the responsibility of leadership comes inflated expectations, even more pressure to perform well, and serious consequences if they misspeak, look bad or represent the company poorly in public.

#### **The view from the top**

Look at it from a CEO's perspective. How would you feel if every word you spoke was scrutinized by hundreds of people, became the subject of endless water-cooler speculation? If one poorly-phrased statement could send the firm's stock price spiraling downward or wreak havoc on employee morale?

Like all presenters, top executives have a range of presentation skills, from excellent to terrible. But unlike a botched presentation from an average presenter, one from a senior executive can have long-term consequences that last months, even years. Million-dollar business deals, media dogfights, tough business challenges and professional reputations have all been won or lost solely on a senior executive's presentation skills.



**“SOME executives STILL LIVE UNDER A DELUSION THAT WHAT THEY SAY TO AN INTIMATE GROUP WILL REMAIN PRIVATE.”**

**PETER GIULIANO**

**The brave new executive**

Most top executives recognize that this sort of pressure comes with the big office and the personal parking space. However, those who coach executives say, many people who aspire to the upper echelons of business underestimate the importance continuing presentation-skills development has on their ability to lead, their effectiveness in the trenches and the arc of their career — indeed, their legacy. “If business communication

has always been important, then it's even more so today,” says Peter Giuliano, founder and chairman of the Executive Communications Group,

based in Englewood, N.J. “Good business communication cannot be done on the fly or with any level of carelessness,” says Giuliano, partly because one of the downsides to today's media-saturated world is that almost every word and gesture does have the potential to magnify itself. “Some executives still live under a delusion that what they say to an intimate group will remain private, but with the way communication has changed, this is no longer the case,” he says. These days, an off-the-cuff comment or seemingly insignificant aside can travel from the intranet to the Internet and eventually to shareholders or the media, all in a matter of minutes.

ity, it's rare to meet an individual who can do presentations cold and still deliver.” Most coaches agree that lack of preparation time is the most common culprit when it comes to executive-presentation pitfalls. When commitments clash, preparation for a speech that's days or weeks away is easy to put on the back burner — but it shouldn't be, Skinner says. What need to change are the executive's planning habits and sense of priority. The best way to make that happen, she says, is to remind them of the cost of failure: “When you do a poor job communicating, it hurts your reputation and credibility. It also hurts the company's credibility and reputation ... and you might not be given a second chance.”

**Does success breed contempt?** Still, many top executives slog through their day-to-day duties without paying much attention to their presentation skills, and in the process sometimes set themselves up for failure or disappointment. Those who work in the cottage industry of executive coaching say that one of most insidious obstacles to presentation improvement at this level is a lack of self-awareness borne of the very success that brought an executive to the top.

According to Merna Skinner, a partner and consultant at New York City-based Exec/Comm, “Many executives say, ‘I know my business and I know my content, just put some words in front of me and I'll be fine.’ In real-

**Who's out there, anyway?** The problem isn't always lack of time, though. An executive presenter may be well-rehearsed, polished and confident, but halfway through might still feel as though the audience isn't paying attention or getting the message. According to presentation expert Tony Jeary, situations like this don't come about because of a lack of practice, they happen because the executive has violated the second deadly sin of executive presenters — not knowing who is in the audience. Jeary, who bills himself as Mr. Presentation, recently wrote the book *Speaking From the Top*, aimed at senior

**CEO SUCCESS STORY TRAINING FOR THE TOP**

**TINA SUNG**, President and CEO of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), Alexandria, Va.

Tina Sung has always had a knack for communicating well with people. But in the late 1980s, her career was changing in a way that would challenge her presentation skills. That's when she was

named director of the Federal Quality Consulting Group. With the title came the responsibility of briefing more than 280 high-level government executives about new quality principles that would be put into place to make governmental agencies more effective.

While preparing for these presentations, Sung met Peter Giuliano of the Executive Communications Group and decided to get some coaching. “It came at a good time, because I wanted the opportunity to get up and speak in front of groups,” Sung says.

The first thing Sung learned was to be open to changing bad habits. “You have to stomach watching your own videotapes, and then tell yourself, ‘I'm just going to get a lot better.’”

Sung completed her training with a small group of colleagues and says that when it was over, they all were amazed at the difference a little training made. “We had a military officer, an earth mother and me, and [Giuliano's company] made each of us stars. It was night and day.”

As Sung's career advanced, she found her presentation duties required her to learn other presentation formats, such as speaking on trade panels, in media interviews and, recently, on the international circuit. With each new challenge she has returned to ECG to hone her skills. “The pro athlete always has a coach,” says Sung, “and they must always work to change their approach to the game as they move up. Presenting is no different.” • J.H.



executives who need to hone their presentation skills. Among the many challenges Jeary addresses is the executive's need for a team of individuals to rely on not only to

design slides and make sure the TelePrompTer works, but to research who's in the audience. "There could be vendors from the outside, internal staff, stockholders, the media.

There could be analysts, or employees from a sister company," he points out.

It's not always easy to craft a message that will ring true with five or six different groups at once, Jeary says, or to deliver a message people may not want to hear. Still, an effort must be made to learn about the audience members and their expectations. "There is a real need to look at all

spective of what the audience needs to know. "As a result," Giuliano says, "it doesn't speak to audience members' comfort level, their fears, their objectives, their emotional state. So it's important to frame the message for the audience."

To find this elusive comfort level, Giuliano advises developing a network of people with different points of view who can provide valuable

## CEO SUCCESS STORY DEVELOPING AN IMAGE

**BING LIEM** president of Consumer Imaging Division, Agfa Corp., Ridgefield Park, N.J.

An expert in the field of digital imaging, Bing Liem was pleased and excited when he was asked to speak at an industry trade show in February 2001. Although the presentation went OK, Liem felt in hindsight that he could have done better. "I

was a crowd of between 500 and 600 people, and I knew I needed to be able to portray the company well. When I was done, I didn't feel I had accomplished that goal."

When Liem received the invitation to speak at the trade show again in 2002, he decided to sign up for some presentation-skills training with Merna Skinner at Exec/Comm in New York City. Liem knew his subject matter well, but was struggling with how to deliver scripted speech. "I would catch myself reading it aloud or trying to memorize

it," Bing recalls, "and I thought to myself, there must be a method to this madness."

With Skinner's help, Liem began to use a method of breaking the speech down into small, bite-size pieces. He bid it out on the page in such a way that each thought was blocked out for easy reference.

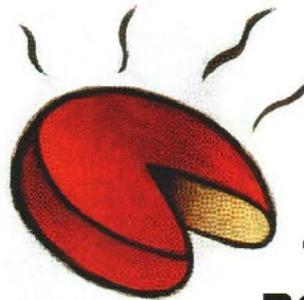
Liem received two half-days worth of training and did a final rehearsal before he got on the plane. As he prepared to go onstage the day of his presentation, he realized he had some stiff competition. "The person before me came in with an entourage of people, including a makeup person, a sound man, video people and others," Liem recalls. "It was all very intimidating."

Liem's competition did indeed present a smooth, polished presentation. Liem was nervous walking out to the podium, but his anxiety passed quickly. "Once I got started I relaxed, because I had done this at least 40 times and knew it well."

His presentation over, Liem was pleased with his performance and even more pleased to hear comments from the audience. "Many came up to me afterward and said they felt my subject matter spoke to the heart of what was affecting their businesses today — and they wanted to know more about working with us in the future."

Liem says the coaching process showed him that although presenting may not come naturally to some, it definitely can be improved with training and practice. "This is an acquired skill, not something you pick up through osmosis," he says. "I was able to make real improvements and was amazed at the difference."

• J.H.



**"MOST LEADERS RARELY USE ALL THE TALENT AND RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO THEM"**  
**TONY JEARY**

the different audience types and work toward a message that meets all the audience's objectives," he says. Neglect this step and you risk miscommunication, or worse, alienating the audience.

The Executive Group's Peter Giuliano recalls a group of executives who had spent weeks preparing to present as a team to employees. All were polished and presented their points well. Still, Giuliano watched audience members leave the room "befuddled, confused and even angry." The employees' reactions took the executives by surprise. Says Giuliano, "They were shocked. They had worked so hard to prepare, but they had forgotten a key point — the audience."

Giuliano counsels clients to speak to the audience's needs rather than their own. The trap executives get into too often is that their presentation is delivered from the speaker's per-

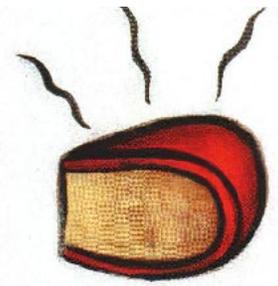
clues about what a given audience is thinking. "This network feeds us with what people are feeling, so the speaker can address those things, actually bringing these people into the communication process."

Inside a company, this form of networking can be as easy as maintaining regular contact with employees at all levels; outside one's own company, however, it requires some initiative on the speaker's part to contact people who will be in the audience.

### Ask for help

Peter Giuliano's networking principles and Tony Jeary's team strategies do more than address audience issues, they impress upon executives that important speeches are not projects they should tackle alone. When it comes to key presentations, there is no shame in asking for help.

Jeary's book details how teams can work together to



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**PETER GIULIANO**

ensure that an executive has everything she needs, from a well-developed script to professionally created and choreographed multimedia. "Most leaders rarely use all the talent and resources available to them within their own organizations," Jeary explains. But a team is only as good as its leadership, and that comes from the executives themselves. Staying in touch with team members throughout the creation process is vital, he says. Executives who think they can jump in at the last minute and expect everything to be perfect are fooling themselves.

**The telltale heart**

An executive can know a subject cold, use the latest technology with ease, and marshal a crack team to create a flawless presentation, but may still be challenged by the age-old enemy of presenters — anxiety.

"Speaking anxiety doesn't go away as you move up the ladder," says Giuliano. "Can you imagine how many times a minute [Hewlett-Packard CEO] Carly Fiorina's heart beats compared with yours or mine?" If anything, the constant scrutiny and high-stakes nature of executive presentations can generate as much or more anxiety than the average person experiences.

According to Giuliano, the first line of defense for anxiety is the one some executives fight the most — rehearsal. "Many resist the need to rehearse, under the foolish notion that it will sound fresh if they don't. Instead, it just opens them up for unknown possibilities."

Exec/Comm's Merna Skinner also stresses the need for executives to rehearse. "Practice helps presenters feel more comfortable with the visual mechanics and other pieces of the presentation," she says.

Skinner advises her clients to do three types of practices. The first should get the presenter used to reading the words with the medium he will use to present, be it a script, TelePrompter or scrolling screen. This allows the executive to find out if his words feel natural. The second time through is to practice for pausing, pacing and punching the correct words. The final run-through should be practiced in the presentation's venue. This allows the presenter to familiarize him-

self with where he will stand, what the room looks like and how the multimedia or AV equipment will work.

**Failure isn't an option**

On the whole, the obstacles executive presenters face aren't too different from the challenges facing presenters at all levels of an organization. The primary difference is that the privilege of being a big cheese comes with inflated expectations, more pressure and higher risks. Failure isn't — or shouldn't be — an option.

One advantage most senior executives have over others, however, is access to resources that can help them develop the presentation skills they need. If they need to hire a speech consultant, they usually can. If they need to put together a team to help them, they have the power to make it happen. If they need more time, they can delegate responsibilities to get it.

In short, when it comes to presentation skills, the biggest difference between top executives and everyone else is that they have no excuse. Every organization has its share of big cheeses, but there's no reason their presentations have to smell like Limburger. With a little humility and help, every executive presentation can be, ahem, Gouda. **■**

*Julie Hill is managing editor of Presentations.*

**OTHER TIPS FOR TOP EXECUTIVES**

**Dump the jargon**  
 "Jargon has crept in over the past few years, aided and abetted by consulting firms that want to add wonder and an aura of mystery to what they do. The executives hear it and think it sounds good, but if you ask them, they probably don't know what they're talking about, either. The name of the game is to talk *people talk*. People understand simple language."  
*Peter Giuliano, Executive Communications Group, Englewood, N.J.*

**Make the speechwriter stand in your shoes**  
 "Many speechwriters can write beautiful written language, as opposed to beautiful presentations. They are writing wonderful prose, but it's hard to deliver. I recommend sending those speechwriters to presentation-skills training so they can put their feet in the shoes of the speaker."  
*Merna Skinner, Exec/Comm, New York City*

**Keep information brief and to the point**  
 "We have a 2 percent rule. You have 100 percent of your knowledge, now present only 2 percent of it — especially with visuals. Audiences can't absorb it anyway, so put the other details in the handouts or accompanying notes."  
*Merna Skinner*

**Don't be afraid to entertain a little**  
 "When to use entertainment? It really depends on the executive's personality, the theme of the talk and the relationship of the speaker to the audience. But I think every single talk could use a little business entertainment, because people like to smile, and it creates a little breathing space."  
*Tony Jeary, author and presentation expert, Flower Mound, Texas*