

## Practicing and rehearsing

Mend your speech a little,  
Lest it may mar your fortunes.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

### Is this really necessary?

There is no shortcut to success and some experts in public speaking recommend one hour of preparation for every minute of presentation. Before you throw your hands up in horror, remember that this includes your planning, organizing and developing stages as well as the practice.

No one ever allows enough time to practice and some of my clients have a number of wonderful excuses why this should be so—the information for the presentation was only ready the night before—if I rehearse I get stale and I lack enthusiasm—I know the material inside out—I don't want to look too slick, and so on ad infinitum.

From my many years' experience of watching speakers, as well as from presenting my own speeches, I know that rehearsing helps you to:

- Become familiar with your material.
- Conquer the blank-mind syndrome.
- Feel more confident.
- Control nerves.
- Develop an effective speaking voice.
- Use positive and appropriate body language.

You are probably aware that practicing is important and yet you keep putting it off until it is too late. I admit that I sometimes do the same and afterwards, when I have finished a presentation, I

always wish that I had rehearsed more, because I know that I could have done it better. In reality, when we don't practice, we are using the audience as our rehearsal and that's not fair on them. We are not being fair on ourselves either. We've probably spent sufficient time planning the content and choosing the words, but we fail to allocate enough time to what will make the difference between a mediocre and a memorable talk—practice. Remember, if you can get up an hour earlier you gain an extra hour in which to practice.

### One step at a time

There are three stages—practice, rehearsal and dress rehearsal. Practicing is done by yourself, rehearsing in front of one or several people and a dress rehearsal is on site with props. All your practicing and rehearsing should be spoken aloud.

### How to practice

Your first run through will probably help you to add examples and even anecdotes which you hadn't thought of in your original preparation. I find that speaking, even to an empty room, frees the brain to be more creative and so, although I have a full talk prepared at my first practice, I stop and make notes and amendments. Also, if you are reading it aloud for the first time, you may find that some sentences are too long or complicated, your choice of words may sound clumsy or you may feel some ideas could be expressed more clearly. It's tempting to continue to alter words and phrases throughout your rehearsing. You must set yourself a time limit for changes, otherwise you will always be rehearsing new material and the main purpose of your practice, to become familiar with your talk, will never be achieved.

### *Don't forget your body language*

You're practicing to familiarize yourself with the ideas in your talk and words that convey them: you are also practicing your body language and your voice.

Always stand when you are practicing, so that you can use gestures and become used to holding your cards. Look around the room as if you were making eye contact with the audience. A full length mirror helps at this stage, although there is nothing to beat recording yourself on video. Don't dismiss this as impractical if you don't have your own camera. It is possible to rent one and, although not cheap, I think if you have an important business presentation to prepare, on which your reputation and that of your company rests, you should consider using video a worthwhile investment to help you improve your performance.

I know of one senior woman executive who changed her entire presentation after seeing herself on video because she realized that she was not conveying her message effectively. As she had begun practicing well in advance of her "performance" she had adequate time to do so; another reason for beginning your practice in plenty of time.

#### *Using a tape recorder*

If you can't video yourself, the next best thing is recording yourself on a tape recorder. Listen critically to your voice. Is it clear? Are you varying the pitch, volume and speed? Are you using powerful silent pauses or are you filling up the spaces with non-words? Above all, is there enthusiasm and vitality in your voice? Does it sound interesting? If not, analyze how you can improve it and practice again and again.

If you know that you will be addressing a large audience without the help of a microphone, place your tape recorder at the far side of the room and project your voice to it. Forget your inhibitions and your neighbors. Let them think that your behavior is strange; it's more important that you practice now and get it right than worry about the neighbors and later make a fool of yourself in front of 100 people. Make sure you are not straining your voice—remember if you have lungs full of air, your voice will carry further and you won't need to force it.

#### **How to rehearse**

At the stage where you can refine your presentation, a live audience is very useful. Use colleagues or friends, but be sure

to give them the background to your talk—who the audience is, what they expect, what your objective is and what you hope to achieve. Only then can your rehearsal audience criticize your talk constructively. You will probably feel very self-conscious and embarrassed but don't give up, try to give your talk as if you had the proper audience in front of you. Make eye contact, use gestures and sound enthusiastic. Make sure they know that you want them to take the situation seriously and that it is important for you to have this opportunity to practice. Use your cards and if you lose your place, don't make any comment, simply continue as you would in front of a real audience; this will give you practice in overcoming sluffs. Encourage your rehearsal audience to ask questions as this will also be good practice for you. (See Chapter 13, Questions and Answers.) They may want additional information on some aspect of your talk—if so, maybe your real audience would also benefit from a clearer explanation.

When you eventually receive their comments, accept them objectively. It's too easy to say "Yes, but . . ." and make excuses for not listening to their views. Make notes of what is said to you and only look at them the following day, when there is less pressure on you and you can evaluate them dispassionately.

Remember that to profit from feedback you must accept criticism with an open mind. It may be irritating but consider what an oyster does with a grain of sand—you too can benefit from unpleasant criticism and use it to create a better talk. If you gather enough feedback, you'll end up with a valuable string of pearls.

Be sure to ask your audience to give you positive feedback as well. Not general praise, but specific instances of good performance—you need to know what to keep. In our courses, we insist that our tutors limit their recommendations to a maximum of three points at each feedback session otherwise the students are overwhelmed and unable to assimilate the training.

#### *Guidelines for feedback*

These are some questions which your rehearsal audience can use in order to assess whether or not you are presenting a successful talk. You may want to add some of your own which

are more pertinent or relevant to your subject matter and objective. You can also use this checklist to evaluate your own talk.

### *Introduction*

- Is the first sentence attention grabbing?
- Have you shown the benefit to the audience in listening to you?
- Have you shown why you are qualified to speak on this subject?
- Have you announced your structure?
- Have you revealed understanding and knowledge of the listeners' attitudes and possible problems in the first minute or two?
- Have you identified with the audience early on?

### *Body of talk*

- Have you announced your first point clearly?
- Have you used facts, examples, anecdotes, comparisons and statistics to support your main points?
- Have you summarized regularly?
- Have you recapped on the previous point before moving on to the next one?
- Have you used rhetorical questions to guide your audience along your path?
- Have you avoided jargon and abbreviations?
- Have you used visual aids in order to explain complex material or to add interest at a dull moment?
- Are the links between each point clear and logical?

### *Conclusion*

- Have you indicated that the end of your talk is coming?
- Have you summarized your key points?
- Have you asked for action?
- Have you ended on a high note?

### *Check your timing*

Always time every practice so that you know whether you need to add or amend your talk. If you overrun on time, don't follow

what so many inexperienced speakers do—either ignore it and continue to the end of the talk or speak faster in order to include every precious point. Running over is a discourtesy to everyone and shows a lack of professionalism. Speaking faster means that your audience will not be able to follow and may stop listening. If you have too much material for the time cut or condense.

Write the timings on your cards, so that when you are delivering your talk, you will know how much time you have left at any given moment. This is particularly important with longer speeches or on the occasions when you have to deal with unexpected questions which use up the time allocated to your talk.

### **Look Mom, no cards!**

As a final confidence booster, try giving your talk without your cards. Put them at the other end of the room and attempt a run through without them. If there are one or two stumbling blocks where you have to refer to them, do so, but continue again without them.

This will give you the opportunity to see the talk as an outline or as a series of ideas. If you can visualize the shape, it's often more helpful than trying to remember all the detail. After all, it's probable that you know the subject well, so it's the sequence of points or the logical structure that you need to have at your fingertips.

### **Dress rehearsal**

This takes place on the site and with the visual aids that you intend using. Most of what I want to say about this type of rehearsal is included in another chapter, *Visiting the Site*, but let me give you one or two suggestions about "dress."

Try practicing at home in front of the mirror or on video with the clothes which you will be wearing for your presentation or talk. This is essential if your body language is to look natural. I have seen men and women casually try to put their hand in a pocket only to discover that their trousers or skirt are

too tight and a relaxed gesture turns into a nervous struggle. Wearing the same clothes enables you to practice all your gestures and identify some of those which you may want to eliminate. I have a silk scarf which I love wearing, but because it keeps slipping, I tend to retie it repeatedly. Fortunately a co-trainer told me how distracting he found this, particularly when I was giving a lecture on distracting mannerisms. Now I only wear that scarf with a brooch securely pinning it so that it cannot move.

Watch out for fingers fiddling with rings, cuff-links, watches or constantly undoing jacket buttons. Keep your jacket fastened and don't fiddle with anything. Some men empty their pockets of everything in order to avoid fiddling, and this also helps to ensure their jacket sits smoothly. Wear the same shoes to practice in that you will for your talk. Are they comfortable, or are you likely to move from foot to foot because your shoes are pinching? Naturally you will make sure that your trousers have a sharp crease and your shoes are well polished. A speaker who stands in front of an audience in a badly ironed shirt, creased trousers and a jacket bulging over a large stomach does not help his presentation. A woman with a skirt that's a size too small, hair falling into her eyes and too much jewelry doesn't help her case either.

### Summary on how to rehearse

- Make time to practice, aloud and standing up.
- Use gestures and vary your voice.
- Use a tape recorder and/or video camera.
- Practice in front of friends and colleagues and ask for feedback.

Remember you are the most important visual aid to your talk. Make sure that even before you open your mouth, the audience feels that you are an enthusiastic and interesting speaker.