

Um, Uh, Like Call in the Speech Coach

By HILLARY CHURA
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Whether to appear more confident, better organized or to stop the “ums,” entrepreneurs are realizing good voice and presentation skills can help them come into their own and even compete against larger competitors with big marketing budgets.



Peter Wynn Thompson for The New York Times

Rebeca Mojica, a Chicago jewelry designer, hired a coach to help her take control of her conversations.

Michael Sipe, president of Private Equities, a small mergers and acquisition advisory firm in San Jose, Calif., worked with a presentation coach who helped him differentiate his business from competitors.

“If a customer can’t determine who is any better or different or worse, then they are left with a conversation about price. And as a business owner, if you’re only in a price conversation, that’s a losing conversation,” Mr. Sipe said. “It is really important to paint a picture of why someone should do business with them in a very compelling way. It’s easy for the customer to say ‘I’ll just go with the big guy.’ It’s the old adage — no one ever got fired

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Even though business owners may be experts in their fields, that does not automatically translate into being able to market themselves verbally. Many agree that speaking concisely — and in a compelling way — lends credibility. While poor communication skills are not necessarily deadly, they can make it more challenging to win over potential investors, prospective clients, employees and business partners.

“Small business is leaving money on the table because it is overlooking one of the most powerful marketing skills: speech,” said Diane DiResta, a speech and communications coach in New York. “Speech is the way a small business builds its brand, establishes expertise, gets free publicity and gets in front of its market.”

R. W. Armstrong & Associates, a civil engineering project management company in Indianapolis, first hired a speaker trainer two years ago to help prepare it for a pitch worth millions of dollars. The company went in as the underdog but clinched the deal after working on timing, learning how to use descriptive words, introduce co-workers and present itself with poise and cohesion, said Donna Gadiant, director for human resources. She said the company paid about \$8,000 to \$10,000 for a day of training for 25 people and that the guidance continues to help employees speak on their feet.

Tom Cole, a general partner at Trinity Ventures, a venture capital firm in Menlo Park, Calif., said good communicators had an easier time captivating investors with their verbal and nonverbal skills than do those with less polish.

“Some entrepreneurs are such poor communicators that they never get past the first meeting with us,” Mr. Cole said. “A good entrepreneur can give you a 30-second elevator pitch that describes his or her business. Sadly, many fail to do that in the course of an hour’s meeting. We’ll walk out of a meeting and say, ‘I still don’t know what the business does.’”

Coaches, who may charge \$100 an hour for one-on-one guidance to more than \$10,000 a day for groups, work with clients on content and delivery, tone, organization, diction, timing, how to enter a presentation confidently and refining a message around essential words. They draw attention to flaws like blitzing through presentations as well as rising inflections that make every statement sound like a question from, like, a Valley Girl. They

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encourage people to use short sentences, speak in sound bites and pause so listeners can digest what has been said.

A less expensive option is the public speaking organization Toastmasters International, where members critique one another's presentations.

Being a good presenter is more of an acquired skill than a born-with-it gift, enthusiasts say. Techniques that work with a large audience are also effective one-on-one. Patricia Fripp, a sales presentation skills trainer based in San Francisco, says that connecting on an emotional level with the audience and telling people what they will gain, rather than what you will offer, is important. Lorraine Howell, a coach in Seattle, advises people trying to modulate their voices to sing in the shower, read to children or record their conversations.

Lawrence Dolph, managing partner of RFD Insight, a turnaround specialist and growth consultant in Ann Arbor, Mich., says that in addition to being concerned with what they know and how they present it, speakers now must be telegenic thanks to videoconferencing.

"It causes you to be assessed as if you were a television actor," Mr. Dolph said. "You need to have good body control so you don't look like a stiff. And a lot of that requires coaching. Unless you have been brought through some sort of actual course, you are probably not aware of your body or speech patterns."

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David Freeman, director for client development at Ashfield & Company, a San Francisco asset manager, sought help to hone his firm's message to pension funds, financial institutions and wealthy investors. The idea was to stop presenters from rambling and have them deliver only pertinent information.

"We may fly across the country to present for 45 minutes to a pension fund or consulting firm that can be worth \$25 million, \$50 million or \$100 million in the amount of money we are being given to manage," Mr. Freeman said. "You want to increase the probability that you are going to be remembered."

When Rebeca Mojica, a Chicago jewelry designer, started her jewelry design business in Chicago three years ago, she found herself being taken advantage of by clients who did not respect her time or wanted free private lessons or discounts. For several months in 2004 and 2005, she hired a coach to help her take control of conversations. She said she learned to be matter of fact in dealing with unpleasant situations and even got tips on how to sit when talking on the phone, with feet planted on the ground and torso leaning slightly forward. She said coaching taught her how to handle potentially uncomfortable situations, cut down on wasted time and reduce misunderstandings.

"I tended to be a people pleaser. I'm a very nice person, which is great for some aspects of customer service but not good for others," Ms. Mojica said. "When you want results, you need to take conversations seriously."

Sharon McRill, founder of the Betty Brigade, a concierge company in Ann Arbor, Mich., hired a coach, Eleni Kelakos, after agreeing to deliver a Chamber of Commerce breakfast speech in 2005. Ms. McRill said that while she was comfortable one-on-one, she felt sick addressing a group. After learning breathing and relaxation techniques, her ums stopped, confidence soared and she was able to stay on message.

"I needed to be comfortable speaking to 300 business leaders — leaders who I don't normally get to speak to — so it was important to come across as competent and smooth," said Ms. McRill, who paid \$750 for the insight. "If you can make an impression by speaking in front of a group or by meeting someone at a networking event that helps you be remembered, then it's going to continue to pay you back later."

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