

The Art of Presenting.

– An Informative Series

NO. 8

Peter Coughter, Jr. – Owner, Coughter & Company; Professor, VCU Adcenter

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Here's what you should know about Peter: He went to Providence College on a basketball scholarship and got a Masters from Syracuse in TV/film. He's been a TV Director (Tidewater, VA), and a Creative Director on Christian Children's Fund for Cabell Eanes Advertising in Richmond – before Sally Struthers. He once was deported at gunpoint from Tanzania. He helped found Siddall, Matus & Coughter at 28, the first agency in Richmond to win One Show, Clios, Andys, etc. He won Ad Person of the Year and AAF Silver Medal for lifetime achievement. He left SMC in '95, and started Coughter & Company. Clients include Goodby Silverstein, Crispin Porter + Bogusky, Fallon, Leo Burnett, The Martin Agency, Butler Shine Stern, Dentsu, DDB, Taxi, Royall & Company, Cramer-Krasselt, Ground Zero, Boone Oakley, Sanders/Wingo, State Farm Insurance, and many others. He is the Founder and Partner of Big Image Graphics and has served as a Professor at the VCU Adcenter since 1997.

1. How do you prepare for a big presentation?

I think the most important thing is to develop a very clear understanding among the team of what it is that we want out of the presentation. Very clear. I start with that. With the end. Always start with the end. Work your way back to the beginning from there, and all the crap that most agencies include, but won't help them get what they want, will disappear.

2. Describe your overall presentation style.

My style is very informal. It's a conversation, only I'm doing most of the talking. I try to be likeable, (which is quite difficult for me) approachable and funny. I use humor. But I never tell jokes. I edit myself ruthlessly. I speak only in headlines, no body copy. I practice concision.

3. Do you still get nervous – how do you deal with that?

Everyone gets nervous. Everyone. If they say they don't they're

either lying or a sociopath. The trick is to use the nerves to trigger adrenaline. Let them lift you up to a higher level. A better you. I have learned that Your nervousness is never transmitted in the same proportion that you feel it. In my workshops people will say they were dying of nerves, but when the crowd is asked if the presenter seemed nervous they almost always seem surprised and say “no.” So forget about the nerves and get on with it.

4. What’s the biggest mistake you’ve made during a presentation?

I’ve made so many mistakes that it’s hard to choose just one. But I’ll suggest this one—not knowing my audience. Not knowing who they were as people, what they liked and didn’t like, what they held dear, what they believed in, what they were expecting from my team and what their capacity for courage was.

5. How do you know when a meeting is going south? And how do you recover from this situation?

Let’s see. Checking CrackBerrys. Eyes glazing over. Sleeping. I think you have to take it head on. Ask them what’s going wrong. If I can see that the meeting is going south, they can see it too. So ask them. What is it that I’m not addressing? Is this what you’re interested in hearing about? What do you suggest? It may be that they suggest you retire from the field and fight another day. That’s fine. At least you get another chance. That’s happened to one of my teams. We came back in two weeks and won.

6. What’s the best advice you can give about presenting?

Understand that it just doesn’t matter how good the idea is unless you can persuade the person on the other side of the table to feel the same way. Whether that’s your CD, the client, a new business prospect or whomever. You’ve got to help them get it. You’ve spent God knows how long working on your idea, yet most agencies talk about how to present in the car on the way to the meeting. Take some time and figure out how to sell it. Give your idea a chance to

live. The number one complaint of creatives is that they can't get their best stuff produced. I wonder why? So much of what we do is subjective. I have one opinion, the guy down the hall has another one, and the client has yet another. If you believe in your idea (and if you don't, you shouldn't be presenting it) find a way to make your audience believe in it.

7. Who's the best presenter you have ever seen and why?

There is no one right, or best way to do this. Everyone has their own style and that's what they should develop. Having said that, Bill Westbrook is one, John Adams of The Martin Agency another, Jon Steel, Alex Bogusky and Russell Davies. That's quite a range of styles right there. Hands down, the single best presentation I've ever seen was by Frank Abignale, the subject of the film, "Catch Me If You Can."

8. Can charisma be learned/taught when it comes to presenting?

I don't think we can learn charisma. I think we can work very hard to become as effective as we can be. Study great presenters. Pay attention to people on television. You'd be surprised how much you can learn. And you can learn a lot of technique and practical points from a good training session. But only if you put the stuff you learn to work. It's important to present in order to get better at presenting. You don't get better at golf by reading about it. You've got to do it. Same with presenting. Take every opportunity to do so. And remember, everything is a presentation.

9. How does an audience influence a presentation? And how do you respond to that audience?

It's all about the audience. It's not about you. Great presenters know that. They know their material so well and how they want to present it that all they're thinking about is the audience. They are in such tune with the audience that they can adjust their presentation to what is going on in the room. They don't have to stick to their

“rehearsed pitch,” they go where they have to go to get what they want. And that may not be in the script.

10. Are there any exercises one can do to train for presentations?

Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.

Know it cold.


And not just your part.

Everyone’s part.

Don’t memorize.

Know it.

11. Any other thoughts on the subject?

I’ve got a lot of other thoughts but I’ve gone on long enough here. Let’s leave it with this: tell the truth. Your truth. Commit to it. And just do it. 

To learn more about Peter and his company, Coughter & Company, simply visit www.coughter.com

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