

The Art of Presenting

– An Informative Series

NO. 9

Ernie Schenck – Executive VP/Creative Director, Hill Holliday

Ernie Schenck – Executive VP/Creative Director, Hill Holliday



Here's what you should know: Ernie Schenck is Executive Vice President / Group Creative Director at Hill Holliday. He is a contributing editor for Communication Arts magazine and the author of "The Houdini Solution: Put Creativity And Innovation To Work By Thinking Inside The Box." Before Hill Holliday, he was a freelance creative director and a founding partner of Pagano, Schenck & Kay.

1. How do you prepare for a big presentation?

I find that not shaving for three days and drinking raw eggs and soda water the night before gets me in the zone. I can see you're not buying that. Okay, well, the truth is, I try to bulletproof the work in my mind as much as possible. I can do that because other than new business, I know the clients I'm dealing with. And I go through a lot of trouble to do deep surveillance on each and every one of them. The quirky stuff they like or don't like. That kind of thing. Know who you're presenting to and you know what to avoid, what to say, what not to say, where not to go, how far you can take things.

2. Describe your overall presentation style.

I'm kind of a thinking type. I'm pretty passionate about the work usually, but the way I express that is with a kind of intellectual zealousness that I really hope is authentic because there's nothing dumber than someone standing up at the front of a room throwing around a lot of \$5 words that everyone knows are bullshit. I've been doing this for a while and what I've learned is pretty much what Kevin Lynch has said in that it

really works so much better when you just relax and be yourself. (See The Art of Presenting #2 for Kevin's perspective.)

3. Do you still get nervous and if so, how do you deal with that?

Haaaa! I'm laughing because for years, I was a nervous wreck if I had to present something. That's because for a very long time, I had a bitch of a stuttering problem. So constipated did this leave me, that I would often get others to do the presenting for me. But a few years ago, something kind of snapped and I have been pretty good at presenting ever since. I'm not sure but I think I just reached a point where I didn't give a damn about making a fool of myself, and once I did that, everything went just fine.

4. What's the biggest mistake that you have made during an important presentation?

Not showing up. I would say that is a pretty big mistake. Biggest success: I got up in front of like 300 people a while ago and presented. That represented a huge breakthrough for me personally. But I think there's a message in there for anyone really. The biggest successes often lie through the scariest mine fields. Don't be afraid to stretch yourself. These people you're presenting to, they're just that. People. Just be prepared. Know your stuff. And forget all the rest.

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

That's pretty simple. If you can support the work with a rational argument, then at least you have a shot. What you don't want is to come across like, well, it's just a cool idea. Clients don't give a damn how cool stuff is. Get yourself prepared. Support the work with intelligent arguments. Make the clients understand what's in it for them. If they so much as sniff it's really all about you and your award show prospects, you're screwed.

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

Besides everything I just said? Well, I'd have to say show your passion. And I'm assuming your ARE passionate. I wrote a column recently in CA called "Is There A Shoeless Joe In You?" I talk about this a lot in there. I think passion is infectious. If you're not crazy nuts about the work, how can you expect clients to be? It doesn't always work, I realize, but without it, you have no shot.

7. How do you know when one of your creatives is ready to handle an important presentation?

You just know. They reach a point where they just turn a corner in terms of maturity.

8. When presenting as a team, how can the person not doing the talking best assist the presenter?

I don't know how to answer that because there shouldn't be anyone not talking. What, you mean like Penn and Teller? This is why Penn and Teller aren't in advertising. One of them doesn't talk. I know what a problem this is because I used to be the one not talking. And let me tell you, it's odd. Clients wonder, "Who is this guy? What's he doing up there?" If you've got someone who for whatever reason isn't going to participate, then that person should stay seated.

9. Can presentation charisma be learned/taught?

Yes. To an extent. I mean you can't be Steve Jobs. But you can study his speeches at MacWorld on YouTube. Some of that is natural magnetism and you either have that or you don't. But a lot of it, you can emulate. Ripping stuff off when you're creating the work, that is a very bad idea, but ripping off a guy like Steve, yeah, that's okay. It gets you started. After a while, you'll develop a style of your own.


10. Have creative presentations changed much over the years?

On the technical side, I'd say so, sure. But in the end, it's still about the art of human persuasion. If you don't have that going for you, none of the other stuff matters.

11. In large meetings there are usually a few attendees who, though not necessarily decision makers, have the potential to affect the outcome with arbitrary comments or uninformed opinions. How would you handle this?

You don't ignore those people, that is for certain. You make eye contact with them just as much as the big shots. They might seem powerless, but do you really know that? It's about respect. You've got to make everyone at the table feel like they're the ONLY one at the table.

12. Any other thoughts on the subject?

There's a very cool web site that I highly recommend to anyone who wants to bring out his or her inner Steve Jobs. It's called PresentationZen.com. Go there. Lot of good ideas. 

To learn more about Ernie and some of his work visit: www.hhcc.com

www.graphicology.com – 2009

