

# Just a minute!



## Ewan Pearson

There is a very funny programme on BBC Radio 4 called 'Just a minute' that has been running for 35 years. A panel of comedians is invited in to compete by speaking on a given subject 'for 60 seconds without hesitation, repetition or deviation'. It's very funny to hear them try, as inevitably one of them repeats a word, or hesitates for more than half a second, or wanders off the subject. A correct challenge by a fellow panellist means that the challenger takes over the speaking and a point is awarded to the person speaking at the end of 60 seconds.

We have created a similar game, with the same name, to help our clients improve their fluency. I'll explain the game later. Fluency is best described as the absence of disfluency. The most common sources of disfluency are:

1. Umms, aahs and errs, i.e. grunts that are not proper words
2. Unintentional repetition, usually of function words, e.g. 'I would like to to borrow a a fiver'

3. Non-sense words such as 'well, y'know, like, sort of, kind of, obviously, basically'

4. Hesitation pauses, mid phrase, usually 1-3 seconds long, but in the wrong place. These are distinct from dramatic pauses for effect.

One famous media person, David Beckham, has the 'occasional' disfluency. Below is a sample of 43 seconds of him answering a question recently on the radio. It contains 32 disfluencies. After removing these, he takes 31 seconds to say the same thing, a 27% reduction and he sounds much much better!

Academics have researched this area pretty thoroughly, and have found that most listeners become aware of disfluencies when there are more than 12, of any type, per minute. They'll think less well of you, you will sound less certain, less confident and less credible, even to the point of being distracting and causing people to become irritated. If you are below 6 disfluencies per minute, very few people notice. Anything between 6 and 12 per minute is a grey area – most people will hear a

Grant Pearson Brown  
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The Communication  
Skills Specialists

Advice squeezed  
straight from the  
experts



Welcome to our 29th  
Newsletter – Spring 2008!  
All comments welcome!

### In this edition:

Ummm, errrrrr, y'know! Ewan Pearson explains how to sound more eloquent by improving your fluency in 'Just a minute'!

WOW! Tim Farish gives you the low-down on how to keep your audience glued to their seats and hanging off your every word in 'Compelling Content'.

'Sail through with PowerPoint' and give a presentation to be remembered. Alastair Grant explains why we can learn from the Royal Navy's 'Three-in-One' blunder.



*"Erm... its pretty incredible you know, even stepping out there for training today was like [pause] 10 thousand, 15 thousand kids here. I think its its incredible you know, how how the sport has grown already ummm here in in Australia in sy and ovsly [sic] in New Zealand erm but it also shows the interest in obviously the team, err the Galaxy. Errr I think that's that's a big thing. Ummmm. For me the support has been incredible you know the moment we touched down in in Australia um to have 85 thousand fans umm in the stadium watch us you know watch us play and we played some good football there you know. I think it was it was an exciting game for the people watching and also here ummm. Let's hope it's err a full house, which I'm sure it will be, ummm, y'know, but it's its been an incredible err time at the moment."*

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# Just a minute! ...continued

## Advice squeezed straight from the experts



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less fluent speaker, but it will have less of a negative impact. We used to think that zero disfluencies was ideal, but recent research suggests a couple of umms a minute is better for creating attentiveness – we'd certainly agree it sounds more natural, and these devices can indeed create anticipation.

So we think everyone should check their fluency and try to improve it, to a level of 6 or fewer disfluencies a minute. To measure your fluency, record your voice in natural conversation, for say 5 minutes, then play back a 1-minute sample to count the disfluencies. You may find that you just don't hear the disfluencies even though they're there, in which case have someone else check and count the recording.

Once you have played the recording enough times to work out which disfluencies you have, and in what quantity, you are ready to play 'Just a minute'. Here's what you do, and yes it's much much (nb. repeated for emphasis!) easier than the radio show....

**Step 1:** Get a stop watch (or watch with a second hand) ready to time yourself.

**Step 2:** Pick a subject you are very familiar with, so that you can talk for at least one minute on it.

**Step 3:** Pick a personal disfluency to work on. E.g. umms and errs, which you plan to avoid doing.

**Step 4:** Start the clock and start speaking. Listen carefully to yourself, and avoid the chosen disfluency. If you do slip one in, stop and go back to the start of the minute and try again. Keep doing this until you are able to speak for 60 seconds without uttering your chosen disfluency. Then choose another one to work on, and keep doing this until you have cracked them all. If you get really really good, try different combinations of disfluencies or to try to avoid all disfluencies.



**Step 5:** Transfer this new skill to your normal speaking. When speaking on the phone, in conversation or when presenting, listen to yourself and if you still have more than 6 disfluencies a minute, try to reduce them to a 'below the radar' level.

In reality, you do not need to eliminate all disfluencies, but this exercise is great because it really gets you to improve your verbal communication, it's quick to improve, and fun to do. The main changes are in getting you to listen to your own voice far better, and to be conscious of the negative effect of disfluencies on the sound you make. You will also become more discerning with other speakers.

Once you have mastered 'Just a minute' you will be a much clearer, more confident, concise and credible speaker. I umm err guarantee it, y'know!



# The 'WOW! Factor' - Creating Compelling Content



## Tim Farish

**R**eading this article will give you a very powerful skill. In fact, by the end of this piece you should be able to capture anyone's attention and keep it for the duration of your pitch or presentation.

The key to compelling content is to grab people's attention at the very beginning of a presentation in a way that makes them want to listen to more. I did this in the opening line of this article and you're still reading, right? Bill Bernbach, the pioneer of modern advertising used to encourage this in his creative teams with a familiar mantra that became a famous catch-phrase during the 1960s and is still relevant today: 'Sell them the sizzle, not the steak.' It worked so well that most of the brands he worked on became household names in a very short time by enticing people to want 'that brand' rather than simply needing the product.

So, how can you create compelling content? Well, the first thing to do is build the key messages to your presentation. This should be tailored to your audience and you should start with the single most important thing that you want them to remember. Most people make the mistake of beginning a presentation with points that are of no real value to the client, such as the history of the firm or background of the people who are presenting. Unless your audience has specifically asked for this it is wasting valuable persuasion time! Most audiences will mentally switch-off in a short space of time unless you give them something that is relevant or interesting, so it is really important that you achieve this quickly. We advise that a presentation should have no more than three key messages – so once you have decided the most important ones then you can structure accordingly.

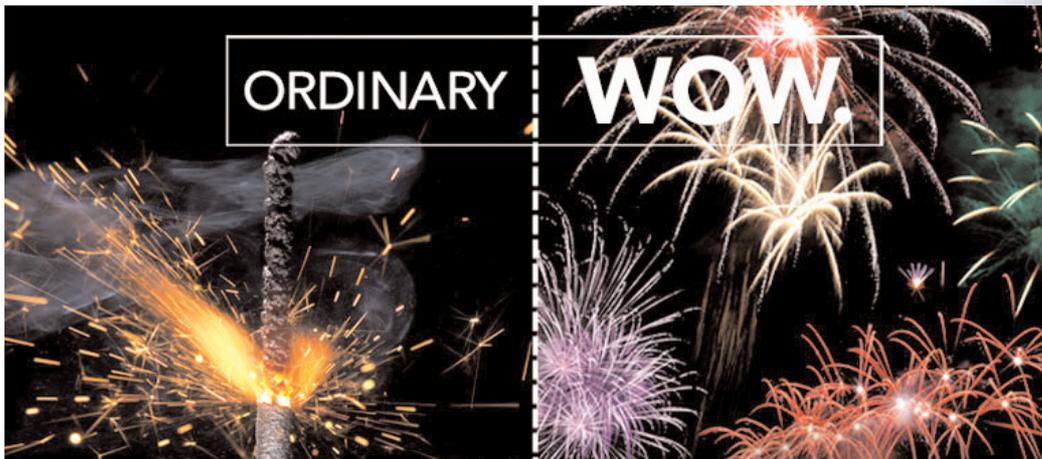
Once you have established your key messages the next thing to do is establish what supporting information you will need. Our research shows that the average length of a business presentation should be no more than 20 mins so bear this in mind when collating your supporting material.

Once you've got all your materials then the next thing to do is structure your presentation with an opening, middle and end. The best openings are ones that have a 'WOW! Factor.' By this we mean something that really grabs the attention.

Here are some effective ways of achieving that WOW!:

- **Scene setting** : Get your audience to dramatically imagine a scenario to create tension i.e. 'Picture yourself about to present in front of the biggest potential client your firm has ever known, then the fire alarm goes off....'
- **Bottom-line** : Grab their attention by shocking them with a statistic or opinion i.e. Did you know that there have been reported cases of people actually dying of boredom during a financial presentation?
- **Bait** : Get them excited by a real benefit of what they'll get by the time you're finished. I did this at the beginning of this article and you're still reading, right?

Once you've established a 'WOW factor!' for the opening, you then need to structure the rest well to maintain the audience's attention. Yup, you've guessed it! That comes in the next edition of our newsletter when we'll look at how you want to leave your audience wanting more! I'm a tease, I know...



# Sail through with PowerPoint

## Alastair Grant



The Three in One Whaler was introduced into the Royal Navy in the 1960s. It was designed to be sailed, rowed and motored. Look closely and you can see a prop in the stern. It did all three things badly! Sailing to windward was painful, rowing was hard work, the motor was slow and above four knots, the crew quickly became soaked in a moderate sea and head wind.

complexity in any other way. Our advice would be to keep it as simple as you can!



Displays could include graphs, pictures, maps, charts and drawings. In addition PowerPoint

allows these to be built up, to be animated. We can even add film clips and sound.

Just like the Whaler, PowerPoint is often used to serve three different purposes and in so doing can fall into the trap of doing each of these badly. Typically people use PowerPoint to do three things which are:

No one is going to challenge the utility of PowerPoint in this area. The issue here is to limit the amount of information because of the phenomenon of saturation. There is so much information for the audience to Hoover up that at a certain stage they are numbed by detail and start to tune out. So our advice is:

- Display.** To show the audience something of value.
  - Speaker's Notes.** To remind the speaker what to say next.
  - Take-away.** To become a handout to take away.
- (There is a possible fourth which is to allow the audience a place to make notes).

- Use visuals sparingly
- Cut out unnecessary detail
- Use blank slides to break up the continuous flow and to focus attention on the speaker. In this way you can divert the audience's attention from slide to speaker at will; you become the master and PowerPoint the servant.

## Display

Being able to show something pictorially greatly assists the audience to understand a point that is hard to describe verbally. This slide below, courtesy of Balfour Beatty, shows the status of a building project.

## Speaker's Notes

At first sight it doesn't look wonderful as you either need prior knowledge or an explanation. What you can't see is that it is linked to a spreadsheet. As data is entered, the status, in the form of colours, changes. It would be hard to explain that degree of

At first sight it seems a no-brainer. Use the slide to keep yourself on track and avoid leaving something out. That's true when balanced against talking without a clear idea of where you are taking your listeners, but such an approach can reduce your personal impact.



# Sail through with PowerPoint ...continued

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That's because the audience have two sources of information: you with your words, your expression, your animated body language and then the PowerPoint slides. Most listeners claim that their eyes are the primary information gatherer and so given a preference they will follow the slide before paying attention to the speaker.

There are many shades of grey here. A person explaining the detail of a diagram should be in sync with the slide so that the audience gains from both sources at the same time. The opposite can also be true. The speaker underperforms by constantly referring to the slide – maybe behind him instead of eye balling the audience to drive a point home whilst the audience have been given carte blanche to roam across the slide like a herd of cattle. They will not focus fully on the speaker's words, vocal expressions and body language.

Our advice is to develop the ability to talk without needing slides as a memory bank, in one of three ways...

1. Of course you may know the subject well enough to *ad-lib*. This is fine as long as you are disciplined enough not to go off-piste. It is certainly hard to keep to strict timings when *ad-libbing*.
2. The other end of the scale is to use a *script*. This is often done by accomplished speakers who want to be accurate, choose their words with precision and haven't time to learn it all.
3. This then leaves us with *bullet-points* or *notes*. They can be written alongside a paper copy of the slide or in the notes box below the slide.

## Top tip

*A5 paper (or folded A4) is much easier to hold; indeed you can even put it into your pocket. Leaving you free to engage the audience with gusto!*

## Take-away

Handing out the PowerPoint slides at the end looks like a good idea but we offer a word of caution. Bullet point word slides are ok when explained by the speaker but much less value when looked at a few days later. Ask yourself how often do you go through a presenter's slide pack after the event and get real value?

We believe that handouts should be capable of standing alone. Even if you were fast asleep at the talk would you be able to make sense of the handout? This means a handout needs to be written more like an article. "This slide shows the superior advantages of..."

This point is accepted by most, but the reality is that in busy times it is hard to avoid the 'Three in One Whaler'. Producing a PowerPoint presentation, plus a 'hand-out' and then speaker's notes is time-consuming. Our reply is, "It's worth it!"

Fortunately there are short cuts. You can plan the PowerPoint slides as a handout version and then go over them again and cull the speaking version. That shouldn't take too long. Writing notes in the margin or on a separate piece of paper or the A5 idea should be done anyway to make sure that you are focused on what you really want to say rather than unloading all you know about a specific slide. Leaving out endless laundry list slides will be hugely welcomed by the audience and it should save you time too!

When the stakes are high, do take time to work out what you want PowerPoint to do and avoid the 'Three-in-One Whaler' Syndrome.

## Our Services

Grant Pearson Brown Consulting is a respected adviser. We enhance the performance of businesses, helping clients to excel in the use of the spoken word, improving the performance of individuals and teams. Over the long term our work improves the way a firm does business.

We coach and advise individuals to perform at their best in the toughest situations including: Presentations, New Business Pitches, Business Development, Negotiating, Media Interviews, Telephone Calls and Document Writing.

We also produce scientific voice and face analysis reports, then provide voice coaching and non-verbal communications advice.

Our clients' needs are the only focus of our work; we listen to them and closely tailor our response to deliver first class coaching and advice. Through our own innovative culture we selectively pursue new ideas and approaches, continually hone our advice and create tools such as Voice Analysis, Prospect Relationship Management (PRM) and the GPB Virtual Classroom.