

Neuroscience, meet business



The world is full of communication experts. But how many have access to cutting edge knowhow, and the insight to apply it?

Stories, pictures and imagery are the stuff of human memory. So those are the elements the most sophisticated communicators use to deliver ideas and information in vivid, unforgettable ways. But not everyone has the style, finesse and charisma of a Barack Obama or a Steve Jobs. The Skills Connection's brief – to turn a bunch of analysts into super communicators – meant tackling the legacy of years of PowerPoint patter and charmless charts. And it took some leading edge findings from the field of neuroscience to inspire a revolutionary approach every individual could use and enjoy.

The Challenge

One of The Skills Connection's top US customers runs a large team of highly specialised research analysts, all of them experts in their fields. Their analysis is first class, but the lessons derived from it need to be conveyed in simple, powerful and memorable ways to non-specialist audiences. Routine PowerPoint presentations were failing to create the necessary impact. The question for the Skills Connection team was simple. Could they teach a set of skills and techniques that would lift the performance of the whole group when it came to putting these complex messages across?

Conventional presentation training had little to offer the analysts in this case. Most of them had read the usual books and attended the usual courses, and the employer had made sure they were provided with a full range of PowerPoint templates. But it was becoming increasingly clear that making significant improvements to the form and delivery of analyst presentations could be one effective way to deliver even better value to customers.

The Process

The task for the Skills Connection team was to introduce a radically different style and philosophy of communication, based on the very latest scientific research about how human beings interpret, process and remember information.

This meant developing a unique three-stage approach that would take participants through the three key steps of creating a compelling story, illustrating it (both literally and metaphorically) and delivering it to an

audience. The training workshops had to be persuasive and interactive, directly applicable to the analysts' current projects and integrated with their day-to-day work processes. It helped that they were led by Joel Wecksell and Simon Levin, both highly experienced and successful ex-Gartner analysts – and by the fact that the content was informed by new and relevant research findings gathered from the frontiers of modern neuroscience.

“It isn't magic. We wouldn't claim our training can turn every weak presenter into a Steve Jobs or a Barack Obama,” says Simon Levin, UK managing director of The Skills Connection.

“But taking part in these workshops does give every participant access to the tools and knowledge currently used by the world's most successful communicators.

“It's all about getting through in a way that engages the audience and achieves the desired impact, as we move the focus of the communication away from the medium and towards the message itself.”

The Outcome

The customer reaction to the Skills Connection workshops was almost one of disbelief, as both the analysts and the company were led to reshape their thinking about the role and importance of face-to-face communication. Though these analysts were not directly involved in sales, the company's contract renewals and new business win ratios began to improve almost immediately, as market perceptions of its capabilities and value delivery shifted in a strongly positive direction.

Individual analysts clearly felt they had experienced moments of real revelation, particularly in relation to the power of narrative and the use of visual imagery.

“The workshops I attended on story creation and creating effective visuals were not just the best I had ever attended – they were the best by an embarrassingly wide margin,” said one participant.

Others kept referring back to the practical nature of what they had learned, with comments like “the most useful and relevant training I've had” and “After years of doing presentations, it is the most useful advice I have received.” One participant even enthused that this was “eight million times better” than his previous presentation training, a ratio The Skills Connection would not necessarily claim as statistically accurate.

For the employer, the long-term benefit of having staff who can communicate complex ideas in a clear, compelling way is a heightened ability to command attention in competitive situations, in itself an important business development asset. In the advisory services area, the ability to prove value for clients is crucially dependent on the analyst's capacity to engage an audience and project expertise and conviction.

For the individual analysts, the payoffs are both professional and personal. There is an immediate return on the effort invested when the new techniques can be applied directly to current work in progress. But there is also a boost to confidence that has wider implications. Employees appreciate employers that train them in genuinely useful life skills, especially when these are built around cutting edge brain science that is still far from public knowledge.

In industries such as research and advisory services, B2B high-tech and information services, communication skills have become a competitive weapon, with serious commercial implications. The Skills Connection can train and hone those skills, quickly, effectively and scientifically, with specific training – as in this case – directly keyed to the needs and processes of groups within a particular role or sector.

- *The Skills Connection helps clients in technology-related businesses become, and be recognised as, global leaders (www.TheSkillsConnection.com)*