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ARTICLE **PRESENTATIONS**

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It was late Saturday night on Chicago's North Side, and the historic Green Mill jazz club was buzzing with nervous energy. So was I. Pacing on the edge of the tiny stage, I gave my notes one final glance, exterminated the butterflies in my stomach, and stepped into the blinding spotlight. "Welcome to the inaugural edition of Mortified Chicago!" I shouted into the mic. "Tonight, real people will read their teenage diaries in front of you, total strangers. It's an unusual experiment that's equal parts comedic, cathartic, and, yes creepily voyeuristic!"

That was 2006. The first time I'd ever produced a live comedy show. Since then, I've helped hundreds of Mortified performers—ordinary, courageous people—turn extraordinarily embarrassing

artifacts of their teen angst into professional bits of comedy. I also started to work at IDEO as a writer and marketing professional.

These days, most of my time is spent in conference rooms instead of comedy clubs, and the performers I coach are designers and consultants who want their ideas to land successfully with clients. I've found that many of the same storytelling approaches apply in either circumstance.

Since TED has upped the presentation game for business professionals, and PowerPoint-as-usual no longer cuts it, you may find them just as useful. Here are the five techniques I've found most applicable outside the comedy club. These come not just from my own experience, but also from my obsession with watching, reading about, and talking with comedians.

Take a bar exam. Unlike conference rooms, bars are friendly, social places. People expect stories told there to be succinct and entertaining. That's why at IDEO, we tell our designers to "Take a Bar Exam." Go to a bar with a colleague—or imagine you're in one—and tell your story using only napkin drawings as your visuals. Have your friend repeat back your story to see what's sticking and what's not. Refine and repeat. Once you can keep his or her attention over "hecklers" like blaring TVs, you'll be in good shape for sharing your presentation in a conference room.

Be immediately interesting. Any time you stand in the front of a room you're saying, "Please be quiet. I'm very interesting," which also happens to be [Zach Galifianakis](#)' opening line in "[The Comedians of Comedy](#)." People expect you to be prepared, confident, and interesting. That's especially difficult if you're nervous. "Do some light exercises before to raise your adrenaline (but not so much you're sweaty)," advises [Neil Stevenson](#), an IDEO Managing Director who coaches TED presenters. And instead of dribbling out a throat-clearing intro, stand up straight, project your voice, and nail the delivery of your opening lines. The first line or two set the tone for the rest of your presentation and put the audience at ease.

Find the "you" in your presentation. It can be hard to find the emotional core, or the "you," inside of presentations on "robust product road maps" or "incentivizing customer loyalty," but it can be done with a bit of story "therapy" similar to what we do with Mortified performers. Why should *you* be telling this story? What's your unique POV? What are you passionate about? For instance, maybe the emotional drive at the center of creating a "robust product road map," is your love of planning and belief in a new design direction for the company. Whatever it is, your story's emotional core will give you credibility as a speaker and help you better connect with your audience

Simplify and exaggerate. Having a story unfold in real time in front of a live audience takes a lot of effort on the part of listeners. They have to hold many details in their heads simultaneously like characters, setting, plot lines, and so on, and they don't have the luxury of rewinding or rereading. To make it easier, ditch unnecessary details and business jargon, supply sensory details (sight, smell, sound, touch, taste) to make your story more immersive, and exaggerate the main points to make

them more unexpected. Or as I tell Mortified performers, “Pretend I’m a drunk college kid in the back row and tell me your story.”

Close strong. “If people don’t know a joke’s over,” says Chicago comedian Adam Burke, “it’s not a joke.” Why do you think a punch line’s called a punch line? People instinctually crave strong, simple resolutions to stories. Weak endings such as, “Well, it looks like we’re out of time” are the storytelling equivalent of falling offstage. They leave an audience feeling unsettled and zap a room’s energy. When in doubt, refer back to your opening lines to bring your story full circle.

This final piece of advice is less a stage trick and more of a mental shift. Start subbing “performance” for “presentation,” even if it’s just in your head. This simple reframing will automatically help you deliver a story in a more entertaining, engaging way.

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