

February 07 newsletter

Chris Witt's letters

Bullfighter is the epoch-defining software that works with Microsoft Word and PowerPoint to help you find and eliminate jargon in your documents. It may look like a little toolbar with three buttons, but it's actually much more. Bullfighter includes a jargon database and an exclusive Bull Composite Index calculator that will allow you to see -- in an actual window, on your PC display, live -- just how bad a document can be.

The rumors were true. Bullshit now has a number. And you now have the power to calculate it, using the freeware** originally produced by Deloitte Consulting but now distributed as a standalone product.

Requirements: We recommend Microsoft Windows XP, with Microsoft Office 2002 or 2003 installed on a PC, plugged into the wall. Bullfighter may not work properly in all installations of Windows 2000 and Office 2000. This version of Bullfighter does not work with MacOS, Palm, Unix, Xenix, Linux, Spandex, Kleenex or anything else you were going to ask about.

http://www.3m.com/meetingnetwork/presentations/pmag_5masters.html

Name: Nancy Austin

Position: Writer, speaker, president of Nancy K. Austin Inc.

Profile: With Tom Peters co-authored best-selling *A Passion for Excellence*, (1985). Authority on how leaders can build enduring, flexible organizations, create healthy corporate cultures and foster innovation. Speaks to groups both large and small in more than a dozen countries on six continents. Columnist, contributing editor for Inc. magazine since 1997.



Preferred visuals: 35mm slides.

Secret strategy: Rehearse frequently, get colleague feedback, research audience to customize presentation, use high-quality photos for visual imagery, use "I" to personally connect.

Nancy Austin says the best speech-rehearsal tactic for her remains simple repetition. "Nothing else is even close," she says. She refuses, however, to watch herself on videotape as a way to improve, citing the benefits of "selective inattention."

"There are certain things you don't want to know too much about," she says. "I have the kind of mind that once that video image gets in my head, it's there forever... there are things I see on tape that are difficult to shake off or change."

Instead, she regularly solicits feedback from other respected speakers -- colleague Tom Peters chief among them -- to hone her platform skills, but has stopped short of hiring a professional presentation-skills coach.

While she believes coaches can help beginning presenters in some areas, "the danger is that their clients will start to look and sound alike. It's important we retain our own styles."

If the passion is gone, you should be, too

Many of Austin's speeches feature an unchanging set of themes, rooted in basic research and experiences she's had over the years, but tailored to express current business conditions. She knows it's as critical for her as it is for her audiences to keep things fresh. "I need to have enough new or customized content each time so it's invigorating for me, as well as for the audience," Austin says.

Lack of such passion limits many a presentation. "The best thing any presenter can do is try to talk only about those things they really care about, that elicit passion and sense of purpose," she says. "Absence of that is difficult to hide."

Expect -- and plan for -- the unexpected

When you speak often enough, the extraordinary becomes ordinary. Austin recently was asked to speak to a large association. Before she took the podium, the host announced that the association's director, who had died a few days before of presumed natural causes, had in fact committed suicide because he'd embezzled money from the association. "They decided the best time to announce this is right before I walk up there," recalls Austin. "There I am onstage, facing his widow in the front row, and an audience that is stunned and hardly prepared to focus on my content. It was a disaster."

Such scenarios are why Austin now regularly checks in with clients for a status report a few days before speaking.

Learn to speak the audience's language

To research audiences, Austin looks at characteristics such as average age, company or industry hot-button issues, and geography. The latter because "different parts of the country can respond very differently to the same message."

To glean audience insights, she sends out short surveys, reads annual reports, company newsletters or magazines, and typically schedules a conference call with two or three key people from the group she's speaking to. "I want their input on my approach and whether they think it will fit. Everyone has particular expectations of you, but it can be difficult to get them to articulate that. You have to be persistent in getting that information out of them. I work hard on that."

Learning the audience's language, rather than forcing it to learn or adapt to hers, also is key. Compare her approach to speaking to a group of engineers on customer service concepts with her approach to a roomful of salespeople. "If I'm talking to engineers, I might talk a bit more about the technology of customer service, break it down and be more systematic about it," she says. "With salespeople, I would probably use more energetic, colorful, vivid language."

Visuals should be flexible and meltdown-free

Austin says many of her beliefs on the use of supporting visuals and presentation technologies are counterintuitive.

"From all the articles and advertisements you see today, you get the impression every presenter is walking around with all their data on a disk, simply popping it in a laptop and wham, away they go. But, my god, the potential problems."

Austin says she'd love to have her library of 500 slides on disk, select their running order with a click of a mouse, and then hand the whole thing over to an AV expert onsite.

"Unfortunately, that's making a number of assumptions I can't rely on, which is why I prefer slides," she says. "Slide projectors usually don't break down and more of the people I work with understand them (although on more than one occasion I've had to explain to AV people the difference between front and rear projection)."

She also prefers slides because they're versatile -- 70 percent of her slides feature high-quality photographs, offering flexibility in her commentary. And, because she rarely uses complex charts or graphs, she doesn't feel a need for the firepower of a computer-driven system.

Don't build an 'AV moat'

Austin believes a good many corporate presenters -- particularly CEOs and top execs -- use audiovisuals as protective armor or "moats" to separate them from their employee audiences.

"I would suggest to these people that they ditch the podium, ditch the teleprompters, ditch PowerPoint, ditch the slides and just talk face to face to their people, particularly during the times the company is going through upheaval or a difficult stretch," she says.

Executives and managers also would be well advised to make their internal presentations more personal, she says. It doesn't take much to get up and speak in the third person about your company ("This is what Acme Inc. is all about..."), but to be true leaders, execs need to talk more about what they think and feel. Not many CEOs are prepared to do that -- even when people's lives and careers are at stake