



Does your presentation team behave like a team? Use improv exercises to strengthen your team presentations. By Anne Scarlett, Printed in RainToday; PSMJ's AE Marketing Journal; and Modern Steel Construction

When your firm is making a presentation to win new business, are they behaving like a true team? Does the audience – composed of decision-makers and influencers – believe your team is credible and effective? Do they experience an overall chemistry?

As AEC business development and marketing professionals, we know by the time we've gone through the selling cycle – relationship-building, due diligence, proposal submissions, site tours, etc – the shortlisted competitors are all well-qualified. Some might even argue that once we've received the invite to interview, the playing field is completely level.

Wow. After all that effort. A completely level playing field. That stings. What can you do to get your firm to stand out from your shortlisted competitors? Naturally, you'll prepare a presentation strategy that tightly addresses the buyer's topmost concerns. Of course, you'll assemble eye-catching visuals, if relevant. It's certain that you'll aim to engage client participation throughout. And no doubt you'll rehearse not just the presentation, but also your management of questions and answers.

But guess what? Your competitor is doing everything you're doing. And their stuff will likely be good. Real good. So now you need another trick to set your firm apart. How about underscoring – through actions and behaviors, rather than just idle words – how dynamic, communicative, and committed your team really is?

For some firms, this portrayal of team is easy. For example, a multi-disciplined AE firm with a low turnover rate may be able to propose an interview team with a proven track record of successful projects, along with a family-esque demeanor. But often, our interview presentation teams are composed of disparate professionals. Perhaps we've strategically included outside subconsultants; entered a joint venture; or simply created a brand new team from our internal staff based on their areas of expertise (makes sense), yet with little to no experience of actually working together.

How in the world can *that* team come across as compatible, innovative, and easy-to-work with? If you have an open mind, the answer is simple: team building through improvisation (improv) exercises.

Improv exercises are not just for comedians. Savvy business professionals recognize that mastering improv skills will result in a myriad team-building benefits: confidence; on-the-spot thinking; high energy; collaboration; creativity; authenticity; high performance; the list goes on.

Scores of improvisation exercises can be found online, such as at Improv Encyclopedia. Make sure that the facilitator of these exercises is motivational, fun, and articulate (so they can explain the methodology and value to resistant team members). Below is a sampling of improv exercises that address priorities typical of a prospective client. Take note, variations exist for every exercise. Adapt them to attain your specific communication goals.

- **CONSISTENT MESSAGE & LISTENING SKILLS:** *Conducted Story* gives team members the opportunity to build a cohesive

story together. Three to seven participants form a line in front of the room. The audience provides a main character, a location, and a mood/emotion. The Conductor starts the exercise by pointing to a participant, who begins telling a story. At any point, the Conductor can switch to another participant, who continues the story flawlessly, even if the switch happens in the middle of a sentence (or the middle of a word)!

- **SYNERGY & IDEA-GENERATION:** The *Yes, and* exercise involves building upon one another's ideas, while simultaneously demonstrating wholehearted support for one another. This one works well, since a core component of a high performance team is its ability to respect one another and to produce outcomes that are greater than the sum of the individuals.
- **INNOVATION & KEEN ON-THE-SPOT THINKING:** *What are you doing?* offers a way for participants to think quickly on their feet and separate visual from oral interpretations by asking participants to act out one action, while stating that they are doing something completely different. Translator is another opportunity for creative in-the-moment expression.
- **TRUST:** *Siamese Twins* forces two participants to anticipate what the other will say in response to audience questions, so that they can say it in complete unison. *Mirroring* is a similar follow-the-follower exercise that can build both trust as well as non-verbal rapport.
- **CONFLICT RESOLUTION:** *Yes, but* depicts conflict that can circle back to agreement. This is similar to *Yes, and*, but the group experiences conflict first. This simulates the release that's felt when a team resolves a disagreement. Further, it underscores the priority of conflict management.
- **ARTICULATION & CONCISE COMMUNICATION:** *I'm an expert* enables participants to practice fielding questions. The participant gives a one-minute spiel on why he/she is an expert at something, and then invites questions from the audience.
- **ENTHUSIASM & REAL-NESS:** There are a plethora of improv exercises (many categorized as 'WarmUps') that increase enthusiasm, build comfort, and eliminate barriers. Some are high energy and physical, such as *Pass-the-Clap* and *Samurai*.

All of these exercises are defined in great detail, often with examples, on the Internet. Search around for one that your team is comfortable with. Virtually every improv exercise involves a "better-be-in-the-moment" and "united we stand, divided we fail" mentality. In short, improv exercises demand the very essence of 'team'.

I'm not suggesting that your team assumes that honing its improv skills will give them permission to deliver off-the-cuff interview presentations. On the contrary! In fact, the more the team prepares and practices its presentation content and delivery, the more that same team will have the freedom to deliver in a tone that sounds conversational and natural.

Practicing one's ability to be in-the-moment through improv has the added benefit of equipping the team with the flexibility to adjust from the planned presentation in response to (perhaps unexpected) audience input. Equally important, improv skills will strengthen the team's overall synergy and rapport, which will be well received by the audience – *your future client*.