



Stage fright: Penman, far left, tries McCann's 'ridiculous' techniques; Ditton, right, started Voicebusiness to take acting skills to the office

Public speaking starts in silence

Actors can teach business people a lot about presentations and, as **John Penman** found out, saying nothing is a good way to start

Five years ago, while chairing a conference at Gleneagles, my mind went blank as I was about to introduce the first speaker. His name was in my notes and I even had dinner with him the previous evening, but somehow it was gone. In my ensuing panic, I knocked my notes to the ground, spilled a glass of water as I retrieved them, hit the lecture stand with my head and finally sat down after introducing "Douglas".

Douglas turned out to be called Keith. I found this out because his name was on a screen behind me in big capital letters. I then sat in front of 200 people who thought I was having some sort of breakdown.

I do not like recalling this for obvious reasons, but I find myself telling this story one morning to Bridget McCann and a bunch of strangers. We are attending a class run by Voicebusiness, a training programme for business people that uses acting techniques. As presentation by PowerPoint begins to have a dirty name, there is a growing demand for its services. I am hoping some of the lessons include how to remember people's names.

McCann, an actress and, for the purposes of today's session, part-

psychologist, says my experience is not unusual. Fright or flight is an emotion deep within us. Running away from nasty beasts in ancient times created the same feelings as the panic when we are called to speak, although in most cases without the same consequences.

"Adrenaline rushes through the system, your throat contracts, your breathing increases," McCann tells me. "It is all perfectly normal. But we can learn to control it and even use it. A little fear is a good thing."

McCann is very persuasive. That must be why we are now all singing "Dad's got a head like a ping pong ball" to the tune of the William Tell Overture. It loosens the facial muscles, apparently, as does something called "big mouth, little mouth". If we had any inhibitions left, they went within a few minutes of meowing loudly.

Voicebusiness was set up by Cordelia Ditton, known to everybody as Dilly. A trained actress, she saw that many of the techniques actors use could be transferred into the business environment.

Voicebusiness runs courses throughout the year, but also works one-to-one with people, including leading figures in Scottish business.

It also runs a course on social networking, such as how to break into a group of strangers at a formal dinner without appearing pushy.

Ditton also hates PowerPoint with a passion. "The brain does not retain the information from PowerPoint in the same way as it does listening to someone who speaks well," she says.

She demonstrates this with a piece of work from Edward R Tufte, a presentation expert, who, to illustrate the power of the spoken word, turned Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address into a PowerPoint presentation. Lincoln's "four score and seven years" is shown as a timescale bar chart.

Some of my colleagues on the course have used PowerPoint, but say that more companies are placing greater emphasis on staff who are comfortable with public speaking.

"We have our radios turned up louder than our TVs because we hear people better when we can see them," says McCann.

To illustrate this, we all recount parts of Under Milk Wood in a loud whisper to a partner from a variety of distances and true enough, despite the background noise, we seem to retain the information when McCann grills us about it a few minutes later.

"People rush at things. They are rushing to get the information across, and by the time people have absorbed it, the speaker is off onto the next thing," says McCann.

To help us control this, she makes us stand still in front of the group in silence for 15 seconds. Try it. It

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seems like an eternity and some of us cannot do it.

"Fifteen seconds? I make people stand for 30 seconds," Ditton tells me when I tell her of how I felt.

"The point is about imposing yourself on the audience, getting yourself ready. Too many people rush into speaking. You need to take a moment to relax, concentrate and focus."

Throughout the day, McCann has a very calming but firm way of guiding us through some frankly ridiculous techniques. Marching while singing, walking around three chairs and reading a sentence while stopping at each one feels strange at the time. But it all seems to make sense at the final presentation — the chair exercise emphasises the importance of pauses.

We finish off with a bit of mind mapping, the technique made popular by the psychologist Tony Buzan, which allows us to visualise the two-minute talk we have to give. My topic is DIY and I get a pat on the back from McCann for going into it in an unusual way — I started with some questions to the audience. I feel like a happy first-year student in a school drama class.

Some of the group still find it tricky to deliver the talk, despite the day's work they have done.

"That is fine because not everyone moves at the same pace," says McCann. "If they go away and practise, then they will find they have taken something they can use."

I plan to sing the ping pong ball song just before my next Newsnight appearance.