

Better than Bullets

What if we told you about a visual aid that is more effective than PowerPoint and does not require the rental or purchase of an expensive projector?

The lights can be completely up while you use this particular aid and a screen is not required. You do not need extensive training to use it, and you don't have to buy a book like this. You do need to read a short chapter in a book like this, Chapter 13 to be precise, but that's all.

Best of all, you do not need to buy this visual aid. You already own it. In fact, you own two of them, and that's good, because they work best in pairs.

We refer, of course, to your hands—the best sidekick a good storyteller could possibly have. Your hands are how you direct attention, how you bring nuance to an idea, how you provide color commentary to complement your slides’ play by play.

Good use of your hands involves two disparate skills: 1) acting naturally and allowing your emotions to flow freely through your body; and 2) learning to do something that is completely unnatural. We’ll start with the easy part.

Communicating With Your Hands

The most important piece of advice that we can give you about your hands is this:

Show them!

When you offer the palm of your hand to your audience members, you do the public equivalent of baring your soul. It is one of the most important components of the trust-building process, and trust is the first ingredient of a good relationship. This doesn’t change with the size of your audience: one or one hundred, your hands might say more about you than anything else.

You might be a natural at this and not need any direction. Most aren’t. Most need to make conscious efforts to work their hands into a presentation in a way that feels natural and genuine. And I can write about this until my hands fall off from writer’s cramp and it won’t be as effective as your seeing it in action. All of the following photos are still images taken from low-resolution video, but they capture moments in time when various speakers have become one with their hands.

One of the most polished presenters in our community is Jim Endicott, who authored the foreword for this book. No stranger to anyone who has attended PowerPoint Live, Jim describes himself as introverted, almost shy, when he is not speaking; put him in front of an audience, though, and he comes alive.

Figure 13.1 has captured one of Jim’s trademark gestures, as he asks his audience “who among us wants their presenters to be perfect?” He doesn’t have to verbally ask for a show of hands; by raising his own hand, he invites audience members to raise theirs. And with the “who among us,” phrase, he removes potential barriers between himself and his audience. In these five seconds, and with this one gesture, he creates a connection with the room that he will be able to cultivate over the next hour.

Figure 13.1

This show of the hand is how Jim Endicott asks his audience for a show of their own hands.



Even with an audience of presentation professionals, most in the room are aware of none of this complex dynamic. They just know that they're interested and engaged in what their seminar leader has to say, and our evaluations confirm this.

Jim concluded the point by sharing a personal experience and Figure 13.2 shows a body in perfect synch with the words. If he were Sally Fields, the caption might read "You like me!" Kidding aside, arms out and palms open says to the group "I'm hiding nothing...this is the real me...I'm willing to be vulnerable." These messages resonate loudly on many levels, most of them subconscious. But set aside the

Figure 13.2

Jim invites trust with gestures that open him up.



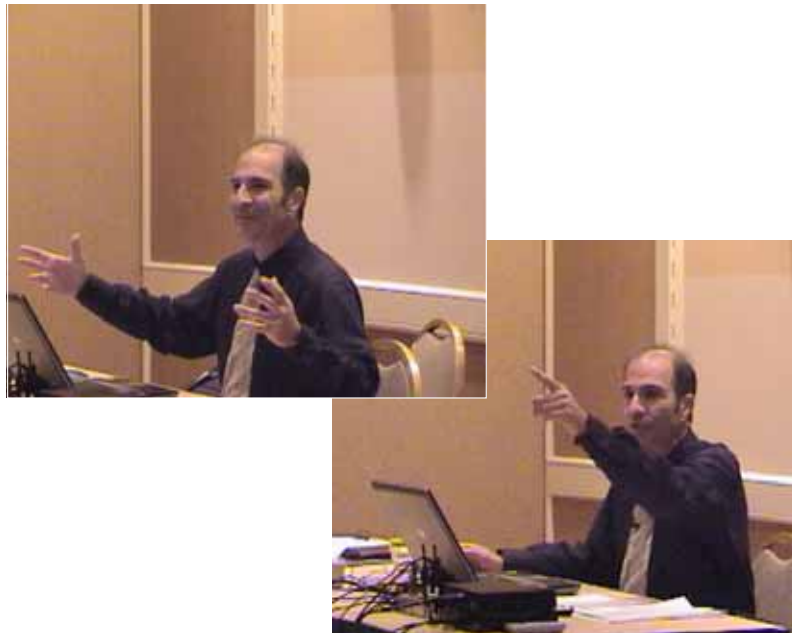
mumbo-jumbo: You probably don't know Jim Endicott, but don't you feel as if you could place your trust in him from seeing this photo? His hands help to give you that impression.

▼ Jim is quite deft at making gestures while holding a wireless remote. Believe me when I say that this takes practice. The first time I tried to count to one in public, while my index finger was on the slide advance button, I used my second finger. That didn't go over too well...

I leave the inspirational to experts like Jim; much of the public work that I do with PowerPoint is instructional. Therefore, I often find myself seated at a table behind a computer, actively working with a software application. While the audience accepts this physical barrier between us, I must still work hard to overcome it.

Figure 13.3 shows two such moments. No subtle gesture at my sides or even in front of my chest will be absorbed by others in the room. All of my gestures must be wide and/or high. Most of the time, my audience members are not even looking at me—they're watching the screen. And when they watch the screen, I'm not just asking them to read 24-point bullets; I'm insisting that they follow my cursor as it drives software.

Figure 13.3
Seated presenters must work their bodies and hands even more.



When I have a point to make, I have to bring their attention back to me, and I am not comfortable blanking the screen (my point might only take 10 seconds and many in the room will choose to continue to study the screen). From that seated position, I am going to have to make an emphatic gesture, requiring good posture and good computer screen clearance.

I have a simple measure for a good day leading a seminar: If my shoulders are sore and my back hurts, it means I've done well...

Figure 13.4

For her design makeover clinic, Julie Terberg was in the zone.



Julie Terberg is a brilliant designer who has chosen PowerPoint as her medium. We hired her to speak at the conference without knowing her aptitude as a presenter. We frankly didn't care—she can design such incredible slides, we figured, we'd find a way to get the knowledge out of her, even if she didn't speak English.

Julie uses personal warmth and her design instincts to tell stories about her work. Perhaps during her first year at the conference, she might have been a bit stiff (not that we remember), but by her third year, she had come into her own. Figure 13.4 shows her describing a continuum from one idea to another: “With a good color scheme, all of your decisions become easier, from simple slides [left palm] all the way to complex charts, timelines, and infographics [right hand].”

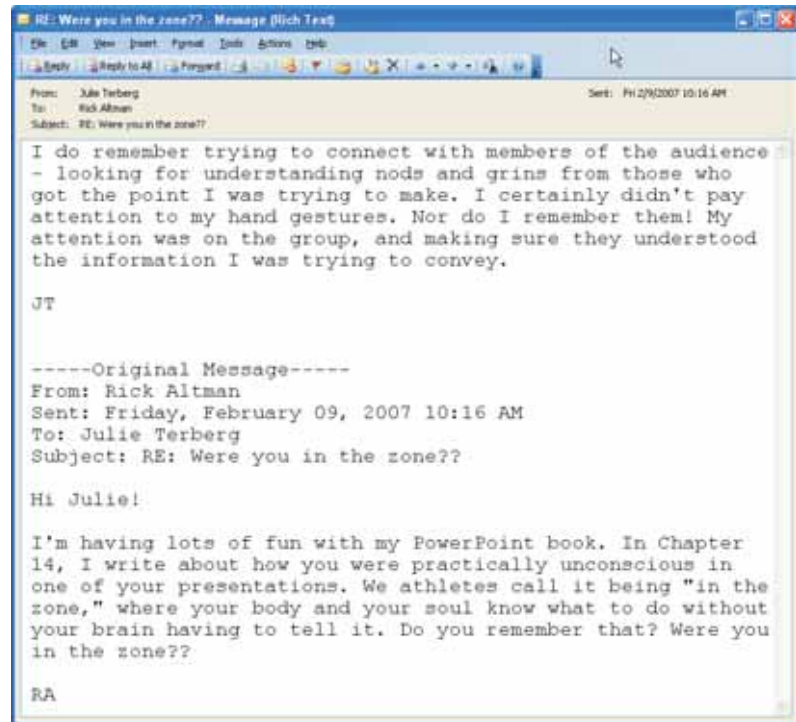
She made several references to those complex elements made easier with a well-crafted color scheme, and she was able to do so merely by holding her right hand out to the side. She had already defined that

space to be “all that complicated stuff,” and a wave of the hand was all that was required to refer to it later.

I suspect that she did this without awareness. When you get on a roll, you experience the best kind of intelligence, where your body knows instinctually what to do without your brain having to get involved. We athletes call it being “in the zone”—that all-too-fleeting experience where everything is working right with minimal effort.

Let’s not assume—let’s ask her...

[sixty minutes later]



Learning How to do Nothing

With practice, you can learn to gesture more freely and effectively. If you're like me, however, you might never feel comfortable with your hands at your sides.

It's called the neutral position and is an important place to get to, from which good full gestures with your arms are easier and carry more impact. Any audience member will readily confirm that the neutral position looks completely natural. I appreciate them telling me so, but it doesn't matter: I can't get used to it.

Figure 13.6
Sometimes the
hardest thing to do is
just stand there.



I keep trying, however, because I understand the value of the neutral position. In order for a gesture to have impact, it must come from a position of rest and from a position where the hands can traverse space. Just like bold type only looks bold next to normal type, it is the contrast that makes it work. If your hands and arms are already up somewhere, gestures lose their impact.

Figure 13.6 is what my audiences insist looks normal, but to me it looks as if I have a stick up my...okay, so moving on...

I regularly mull over alternatives:

Hands behind my back: This looks relaxed, but if I hide my hands, I look shifty. Remember, showing the palm of your hand is an important gesture of trust.

Hands clasped in front of navel: I don't feel like such a dork in this position, but gestures end up getting clipped at the forearms. Before long, I look like I'm praying.

Hands together and down: This is fine for about five minutes. Then I get lazy and out comes the "flashing fig leaf"? That's when a speaker speaks so quickly, the hands can't keep up. They remain cupped in front of the private parts, except for the occasional flip of the wrists.

Hands in pocket: Too surfer dude.

One arm resting on side of lectern: This is a comfortable position, but it is not sustainable and therefore isn't neutral. After five minutes,

I begin to fidget, shift my weight, cross one leg over the other, and generally act like I don't belong up there.

Holding a microphone: Now we're talking! I can walk around with a wireless hand-held all day and I have done so many times. But that's just it—it's great for being a strolling host, not as good for being an impassioned speaker. Inevitably, it gets in the way and becomes a barrier.

My best alternative, really, is to keep practicing—practicing standing in a neutral position. One of these days, I will get over on the idea that I don't look as foolish as I feel.

Just use the lectern!

This is the alternative that is most often used, and I will normally spend at least a few minutes every seminar behind one. It's not a crime to stand behind a lectern, and there are some occasions where the extra formality is appropriate. For situations where you are speaking from freshly-written notes, a lectern is tremendously convenient.

But you must understand that a large hollow box of fake wood between you and your audience members will not help you in connecting with them. You will need to work harder to compensate:

- You should pause more often, making sure to look up from your notes for several seconds at a time. Ideally, you can begin your next thought while still looking out before having to refuel and take in more notes.
- Stand as upright as you can. In fact, lean over the lectern—audiences will feel it.
- Above all, make sure your gestures are up and out in front of the lectern.



Your challenge is to find a gesture that contains energy and allows you to show emotion. Then use it—early and often! Just about everyone is going to experience some awkwardness with some aspect of physical gesturing, and you need to know that it will get easier with practice and that nobody else thinks you look foolish the way you think you do.

All I know is that I shouldn't be the only one to be made to feel like a complete moron while standing in front of a full-length mirror practicing. So if you're ever near Pleasanton CA, please come visit me and we can stand like morons in front of a mirror together.