

# Caught on Tape

**How to use video or audio recording as a self-development tool.**

By Lynda Ford

THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT WAYS to develop your presentation skills, from attending how-to seminars to reading cutting-edge publications. But one powerful tool that's available to you is often overlooked and underutilized.

That tool is video and audio recording, and the reason why it isn't used more often is fear. Watching and listening to your own presentations can be a painful and esteem-sapping experience. However, not doing so can limit your growth and, ultimately, your competency.

Advantages to recording your presentations include

- a real-time perspective on your presentation skills
- immediate, indisputable feedback
- minimal requirements for equipment and technology know-how
- the ability to watch or listen multiple times.

## **The critical critique**

Brace yourself! The first time you watch yourself on video is likely to be a less than pleasant experience. Yes, that's what you really look like. If it makes you feel better, convince yourself that the camera does add 10 pounds. Now, watch with a critical eye. A few more sets of eyes (family, friends, or colleagues) can give you added input and support.

You'll want to watch the tape in its entirety three times or more. Keep paper and pen handy to take copious notes. Here's how to do it.

**The first time.** Watch the video straight through. (If you're critiquing an audiotape, you'll skip this first step.) Take notes on physical attributes: how you command the room; relate to people; and use body posture, position, and eye contact. In addition, look for "annoyances" or nervous habits, such as finger tapping, playing with markers or a laser pointer, licking your lips, and so forth. Do

you turn your back on the audience while talking? If the video includes audience shots, is your audience engaged? Listen to the presentation. Does it flow? Do you sound like you know the material inside and out?

**The second time.** This time, either dim the picture or turn your back on the television screen (or simply listen to the audiotape). Your only job on this go-round is to listen to your voice and take notes. Are you speaking in monotone, or do you use vocal variety? Do you speak too slowly, too quickly, or do you mix up the pace? Do you use pauses appropriately? Are you using certain words too often? And what about those "ums," "ahs," and "you know's"?

**The third time.** This round is stop-and-go. You'll want to play the tape, stop it in different sections, rewind, replay, and start it again. This pass helps you catch things that weren't evident on the first two tries. By this time, watching the videotape should be a little easier. Continue documenting your observations.

**The fourth time.** If you're feeling brave (and by this time you should), ask someone who you respect as a presenter to critique your tape. He or she should not be a family member or friend—the impartial expertise can be invaluable. This person can provide a more balanced point of view and offer new insight, which will be especially important for your personal development plan.

As you go through this exercise, remember to strive for balance. While we all have a tendency to dwell on the negatives, don't forget to give yourself credit for what you did well.

## **The development plan**

By now, you should have a list detailing what you excelled at and what needs improvement. Make two columns on a sheet of paper, one labeled strengths and the other weaknesses. Then, put the items from your critique into the correct column. Your paper might look something like this:

Now decide on your presentation development goals. Looking at the two columns, do you see any common themes? Examining this strengths

## Ten-Point Checklist

- Make every effort to record in front of a live audience. You'll be more on top of your game and the recording will be more realistic.
- In the beginning, record presentations on material that you're completely comfortable with. It can be nerve-wracking enough to record yourself; don't complicate it by trying to present new content.
- Do a short trial run before the start of the program and before participants arrive. That will allow you to work out any bugs.
- Unless you're bringing in a professional videographer or recording engineer, remember that your recording will not be perfect. The goal is to capture your presentation, not make a Hollywood movie.
- Use a microphone to ensure your voice is picked up adequately. Many reasonably priced models are available.
- If you don't have someone running the video camera, check ahead of time to make sure it has wide enough coverage so you don't have to stand perfectly still. You don't want to be out of view every time you move five steps to the left or right.
- Check lighting and acoustics prior to the start of the presentation. Make adjustments in your equipment to compensate for any deficiencies.
- Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. Never wing it. The more you repeat the presentation, the more naturally it will flow.
- Critique the taped presentation within a week. And, as painful as it may seem, have a trusted friend, colleague, or family member critique it with you. Better yet, ask a respected presenter for feedback.
- Be yourself. Let your personality shine through. That, after all, is what people want to see and hear.

column, it's evident that the presenter has done a good job of connecting with the audience. She knows the material well and is able to deliver it with passion and enthusiasm. She probably doesn't need to work on content or engaging the audience.

However, a common thread in the weaknesses column is vocal skills. Another common theme is flow (turning back and note shuffling). So, this presenter's two development goals might be

1. Make the following vocal skill improvements:

- learn to use pauses more effectively
- learn to better pace the presentation
- eliminate the word *okay*
- eliminate the nervous habit of licking lips.

2. Improve the flow of the presentation by

- developing a system to better organize notes and eliminate shuffling
- being aware of body position when writing on flip charts or referring to slides (face the audience when speaking).

It's important to keep goals simple and workable, so start with no more than three. If you have more developmental needs, that's okay. Simply prioritize your list and begin with the top items. It's also important to identify specific steps under each goal, as shown with the bul-

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### Strengths:

- strong opening and closing
- connected with audience
- good command of material
- passionate about subject
- good use of humor
- good eye contact

speech or presentation skills coach.

Put reasonable timelines on each goal and develop a way to measure and assess progress. In this case, the trainer might decide that goal 2 is easier to achieve and therefore will have a shorter timeline. Goal 1 may require more time.

Accurately measuring progress will require a reliable feedback method. That will probably mean either more videotaping or audiotaping, asking someone to critique your sessions over a period of time, or a combination of both.

### The plan implementation

It's now time to put your plan into action. If you've chosen to have another person critique you, make sure you brief him on what you're trying to improve. Ask him to take detailed notes in each specific area. After the session, sit down together and review the notes. Determine if you're making progress. Repeat this process with each session.

Record as often as possible. Watch or listen to each new tape and compare it to the previous one. Go through the steps in the critical critique section. Note where you're improving and what still needs to be done. Make changes in your presentation style based on the feedback you're receiving.

Within a few months, you'll see yourself growing as a presenter. The tempo-

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### Weaknesses:

- turned back when using slides and flipcharts (while talking)
  - too much note shuffling
  - nervous habit of licking lips
  - used the word *okay* too much
  - talked too fast
  - need to pause more for impact
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leted items above.

You'll also need to make decisions on how to accomplish each goal. You may be able to improve some of the bullet items on your own, but you may require outside assistance for others. That could include using a coach, attending a formal train-the-trainer program, or joining Toastmasters. Eliminating the word *okay* might only require some extra focus. Improving pacing or using pauses more effectively might mean working with a

rare and short-lived pain pays off in developmental gain.

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