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VIEWPOINT

By Carmine Gallo

How Cisco's CEO Works the Crowd

Imagine how successful you could be if you incorporated John Chamber's five key public-speaking skills into your presentations



This month, networking giant Cisco Systems (CSCO) launched an ambitious \$100 million marketing and advertising campaign aimed at increasing awareness about its products for everyday consumers. The new ad campaign reminded me of conversations I had with Cisco executives while researching and writing my book, *10 Simple Secrets of the World's Greatest Business Communicators*.

I recalled just how captivating Cisco Chief Executive Officer John Chambers could be in front of an audience of employees, investors, or customers. In fact, I wrote the book with Chambers at the top of my mind. He is undeniably one of the most charismatic speakers in Corporate America today. His speeches are astonishing. Now imagine how successful you would be in your business if clients described you as "astonishing."

Here are five ways Chambers electrifies his listeners that you can incorporate into your personal playbook:

Sell the benefit.

What does Cisco sell? On its face, Cisco sells hardware that most of us never see—routers and switches that link networks and direct traffic over the Internet. But listen to a Chambers presentation and he sells much more. Chambers sells the dream of a world made better by Cisco's hardware, a world in which the Internet improves the way we live.

In *The New Imperialists*, Mark Leibovich explains why Chambers originally took a sales job at IBM when his background was better suited to marketing or operations. "The company wasn't selling products as much as it was selling dreams—dreams of a business process made more efficient. It was a philosophy that allowed Chambers to peddle hope and possibility, which was far more exciting than the widgets he was actually selling." Sell dreams. Peddle hope. It's a key to Chambers' ability to persuade and motivate any audience he addresses.

Tell stories.

Cisco's new advertising and marketing campaign is aimed at inspiring potential customers and investors by telling stories. The campaign's ads are called "Voices of the Human Network" and demonstrate how the Internet changes lives every day and connects people around the world. It's very consistent with the way Chambers speaks on the topic, selling the benefit of his technology by telling stories about how it improves people's lives.

On Cisco's Web site, the company urges individuals to share their stories about how the network is transforming their life. The stories are heartfelt, personal, and full of emotion. For example, one story, "Connected to a Cure," features a woman whose baby had a rare respiratory virus that made it hard to breathe. Doctors were stumped and no literature was published on the topic. She posted her story online and met a woman whose baby had the same symptoms.

The mother was put in touch with a doctor who understood the case and within a month the baby was fine. Notice what's missing? Technical jargon. None. Jargon doesn't inspire. Stories do. There are more stories. The common theme is that staying connected brings people together and it's Cisco products that make it possible. But routers, in and of themselves, are not inspiring. It's what the routers do for people that's inspiring.

Make preparation a part of your routine.

When it comes to preparing for an interview, presentation, or conference, the rehearsing that John Chambers puts into his communications is second to none. In a room of 5,000 employees, each and every person feels as though Chambers is speaking directly to him. That's because Chambers works hard to make people feel emotionally connected to him.

Executives who have worked closely with Chambers on his presentations tell me that he completely internalizes the content of his message. If he's speaking from a PowerPoint presentation, he will review six slides on a sheet of a paper to memorize the bullet points on each slide and get the flow just right. But it doesn't stop there. He knows where the inflection points are, when he's going to leave the podium and walk into the audience, when he's going to praise people by name, and when he's going to pause.

Chambers is in complete command of his material and the way he's going to deliver it. His rehearsals also allow him to make all-important eye contact with everyone in the room instead of reading from notes or slides. His preparation shows. Chambers appears enthusiastic, engaged, and completely at ease.

Use confident body language.

Observers say that there is a "Baptist minister" quality to Chambers' speeches. He is an evangelist in many ways. Chambers preaches the power of the Internet to connect people and illustrates it by breaking the physical barriers between himself and his audience. He walks away from a stage or podium at every opportunity. He touches people on the shoulder. He looks people in the eye. He gestures. Chambers' body language is authoritative, confident, and in control. Chambers makes sure the power of his movement matches the power of his words.

Overcome personal challenges.

Chambers has battled to overcome dyslexia. While dyslexia caused him much pain as he grew up, it also instilled in him a Spartan work ethic, according to a 2004 interview he did with *Chief Executive* magazine. He also used the challenge to transform himself into a polished communicator.

Chambers has said his dyslexia forced him to see the big picture instead of be mired in details and it's helped him as a speaker because audiences are often bored by listening to details. They want to see the big picture and Chambers delivers. His dyslexia also forces him to memorize major sections of his presentations and to prepare more diligently than most speakers—the result is a leader who speaks with conviction, clarity, of a vision that leaves listeners in awe.

Throughout his career in sales and today in the top spot, Chambers has consistently worked at becoming a more polished speaker. His closest advisers told me that they have seen him evolve as a speaker through hard work, preparation, and commitment. So how do you get to be an astonishing speaker? Work at it. That's the Chambers way.

Gallo is a Pleasanton (Calif.)-based corporate presentation coach and former Emmy Award-winning TV journalist. He's the author of the book *10 Simple Secrets of the World's Greatest Business Communicators*. Visit him online at www.carminegallo.com

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