“Step into the Limelight”

Overcoming performance fears can help you gain greater visibility, and more business. Get tips on working with the media, using improv to improve sales, dressing for success, and becoming a better speaker.

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In an era when truly all the world’s a stage, what makes you stand out as a serious player among the million-plus real estate practitioners out there?

Knowledge, service, and hard work are the fundamentals. But where do you go to gain that certain edge?

Standing out from the crowd starts with breaking out of your comfort zone. To see how that’s done, we sat in as brave real estate practitioners in Chicago, tried their hand at improv. Then we visited a group of Columbus, Ohio, practitioners who were learning how to combat negative media attention head on.

Practitioners who completed these unconventional training sessions said they gained courage, clarity, and credibility in their interactions with the public and the media. Not a bad return during these challenging economic times.

If you think it’s nerve-racking walking into someone’s kitchen for the first time hoping to get a listing, imagine prancing around in front of your peers like a frisky pony or squirming around the floor on your hands and knees.

That’s the prospect 26 real estate pros faced when they showed up recently for an improvisation class in Chicago. At the start, each had to come up with a distinctive physical gesture that would take them out of their comfort zone. Their instructor, Matt Tiegler, told them not to let fear of public humiliation get in their way.

Rusty Schluchter, 32, waited until the last possible second to find his move. The six-footer hopped like a steroidal frog for what felt like an eternity, he said later. “I definitely felt out of my element,” said Schluchter. “But it got easier once I got into it.”

Schluchter, who entered the business three years ago, helped build and now oversees a six-member sales and marketing team affiliated with the independent brokerage @properties in Chicago. But at the start of the six-week improv course, the affable real estate pro admitted that he was prone to self-doubt and outbreaks of cold sweat at the prospect of holding meetings with even two clients at a time.

Hence, Schluchter, who closed 36 transactions worth $6.9 million last year, found great appeal in the promise that the class would bolster his confidence and his listening and speaking skills as well as his overall business acumen. To be sure, such progress occurs incrementally.
On the first afternoon of class at the landmark Theatre Building on Chicago’s North Side, Schluchter’s major achievements included learning which of his two dozen colleagues favored skydiving over spa treatments (to foster memory development), mimicking the sound effects of fellow participants during a game of “invisible” catch (“The lesson here is always seek to understand the other person before you seek to be understood,” Tiegler explained), and crafting an extraordinary tale on the fly about a toaster oven.

“Action cures fear,” the instructor said. “If you do the thing you fear over and over, you will make fear go away.” Indeed, simply showing up for class was a mark of courage for many of the participants.

There’s no shortage of programs to help real estate practitioners hone their selling, technology, and business management skills, but performance and improv classes offer unique benefits for both newcomers and world-weary sales veterans.

Tiegler, a former teacher with Chicago’s famed Second City improv organization, has taught non-actors for a decade. Three years ago, he founded his own training company, TIG Ideas, and eventually developed a customized improv program for @properties after executives there became convinced that the classes’ fun and challenging activities, which force participants to think on their feet, could boost the poise and productivity of their growing sales force.

“We don’t do role playing, and I’m not teaching them how to change their selling style,” says Tiegler, who has worked in technology sales and understands the business pressures his pupils face. “I’m emphasizing risk-taking and facing your fears.”

Tiegler devoted one session almost entirely to improving participants’ verbal agility. “We’re going to sell things to each other. But we’re not going to sell a thing; we’re going to sell a benefit,” he told the class, imparting a nugget of wisdom that could help the participants when they’re back on the job.

Schluchter’s assignment: Sell a timeshare unit in Iran with the added benefit that it would improve your love life.

“There are flowers everywhere and a heart-shaped bed,” an increasingly sure-footed Schluchter told his partner. Nearby, a fellow classmate was striving to sell a horse that slowed greenhouse gas emissions, while another extolled the benefits of a flock of ducks that would reduce state taxes. The goal of the day was to create a connection between two seemingly unrelated things. Everyone stepped up to the challenge valiantly.

Over the past three years, @properties has sent more than a third of its 600 salespeople to Tiegler’s classes, spending about $150 for each participant in the six-week program.
Rich Rogala, staff performance coach at @properties, is thrilled with the return on investment. “Our people are really blossoming because of these classes,” he says. For him, the classes are as much about strengthening cooperative efforts and collegiality as about fostering individual skills.

Improv alum Hawk Durham says he’s more comfortable departing from traditional real estate scripts since he completed the class two years ago. “Our job is to lead people to what they want and help them understand their options,” he says. “The class taught me to be a better listener so that I could really broaden my understanding of what people want and why.”

Salesperson Martha Ring says the confidence boost she got has enabled her to widen her client base.

“I now work with more doctors and lawyers. I’m not as intimidated as I was before,” she says. She’s also more aware of reducing physical space between her and prospective clients during meetings and open houses. “I used to stand behind a counter or even in the next room when we talked. I was timid in my conversations,” she says. “Now I have a better connection.”

At the end of the course, Schluchter was looking toward his future with renewed enthusiasm and a tinge of sadness that the sessions were over. “I’ve lost both my fear of rejection and my fear of looking stupid,” he says. “I don’t think I’ll question myself in business so much.” And if he does encounter a dicey professional situation, he could always hop away like a steroidal frog.

To find out whether similar programs are offered in your area, contact local theater or improvisation companies. Individual acting coaches may also offer training for non-actors.

The Takeaway

- Seeking the safest path in your business dealings is unlikely to lead to success.
- Being overly concerned about looking foolish may cause you to miss out on building new connections.
- Focus on listening more than speaking.
- Remember that you’re selling a benefit, not a thing.

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