



*The Art of Presenting.*  
*An Informative Series*

NO  
**4**

---

*Debbie Millman* – Sterling Brands – New York, New York

---

---

*Debbie Millman is a Managing Partner and President of the Design Division at Sterling Brands, one of the leading brand identity firms in the country. She has been there for ten years and in that time she has had the distinct fortune of working with Gillette, Kraft, MTV, Star Wars, Nestle, Pepsi and Campbells among others. Debbie is a board member of the National AIGA, a mentor at the High School of Art & Design and she teaches at the School of Visual Arts. She is also an author on the design blog Speak Up, a contributor to Print Magazine and she hosts a weekly internet talk show on the Voice America Business network titled Design Matters.*

---

## **1. *How do you prepare for a presentation?***

I take presentations very, very seriously. I prepare every second of every day – as every experience and every observation of the world contributes to how I present and what I present. I read a tremendous amount: newspapers, magazines, blogs, news sites, media sites, basically anything I can get my hands on or head around. That being said, I also do a substantial amount of research before I make a professional presentation: I investigate everything I can about a company and gather and read as much as possible. I believe that presentations are as much about communicating how much you understand a potential client as it is about communicating who you are and what you stand for.

I also believe in relentless preparation – Rudy Guliani used to say that for every hour he spent in court, he would spend four hours preparing! I don't necessarily go to that extreme, but I do prepare quite a bit. I like to try and have as a goal that nothing unanticipated will happen (which is virtually impossible, but it's a goal!) and to insure that, I find it is helpful to visualize every scenario and rehearse as much as you can. It is also helpful to anticipate the questions you might be asked – as well as the worst case scenario (what will you do or say if your client hates everything???) in order to get you through anything that might happen. I also find it is beneficial to instill preparedness in others.

I also make sure that I have a sound strategic point of view and philosophy. Who we are as designers and what we believe in is as important as our ideas.

---

*Debbie Millman* – Sterling Brands – New York, New York

---

**2. *Describe your overall presentation style.***

Very down to earth, very accessible. I am not terribly funny, so I don't inject too much humor, but I do try to be warm and engaging. Good presentations are really about telling compelling, relevant, believable stories. I try to do this with as much authenticity and honesty as possible.

**3. *Do you still get nervous during presentations?***

I don't really get too nervous anymore. But I have been presenting for nearly 20 years. Occasionally I still do, when I speak in front of very large groups or when my technology fails. Once, at a HOW conference, in front of 1500 people, my projector would not sync with my laptop. That made me sweat. But if you are nervous, that doesn't give you the excuse to not prepare or not present! You must do it anyway. You can project confidence without necessarily feeling it!

I recently read that Barbra Streisand's greatest talent isn't her singing or acting, but her ability to sing and act despite her massive stage fright. You just have to do it anyway. It is like going on a diet – you know you are going to be hungry, but you still don't eat as much. When presenting, you prepare yourself to be nervous, but you still have to get up and present. George Patton once said "All men are frightened, the more intelligent you are, the more frightened you are." So be frightened, but don't give yourself an out to not do what you know you need to do – and do well!

**4. *How do you deal with a limited or set presentation time?***

I never, ever ask someone how much time I have IN the meeting. Only before! In the meeting, you are giving away your power by asking permission for anything. It is your meeting! So if I have a limited amount of time, I make sure that I don't blather on like an idiot. I try and keep it short and simple. If people are enthralled by what you are saying, you'd be surprised by how lenient they will be with time constraints! But if you are in doubt, take something from your presentation out.

---

*Debbie Millman* – Sterling Brands – New York, New York

---

I highly recommend showing only what you love. Do not apologize for work that that doesn't look good projected – take it out a head of time. What happens in a presentation is so very little about the work! It is about rapport, it is about connecting and it is about relating.

## **5. *What's the biggest mistake you've made during a presentation?***

Several:

- \* Not finding a way to connect with the person or people I am presenting to.
- \* Trying to convince someone that something that they didn't like in my portfolio was better than they thought it was. NO ONE will ever like something they don't like just because you have a compelling reason for them to do so! If they don't like something and they tell you, move on. Don't belabor it, don't fight it and don't try to convince them they are wrong. No one likes to be wrong, so you will just end up making things worse.
- \* Talking about something I didn't know enough about and sensing that the audience could tell. They always can. In the words of my god-daughter: Life is difficult when you don't know what you are talking about. Only talk about things you really know. People can *always* tell when you are pretending.
- \* Misunderstanding or misinterpreting the client's needs by not starting a project off with a creative brief. I have found out the hard way that common vocabulary does not equate with common behavior. You have to really, really listen and reiterate what your client wants in a creative brief before doing any work. One *solid day* spent on a creative brief can save *weeks* of creative time.

## **6. *How do you know when a presentation is going south – and what do you do?***

I always try to be aware of what Patrick Lencioni calls “artificial harmony.” That niggling feeling that you have when you are trying to convince yourself things

---

*Debbie Millman* – Sterling Brands – New York, New York

---

are going well when in fact they are not. Always follow that instinct. If you think that someone is not relating to you or your work, stop. Ask them this: I am getting the feeling you are not loving this work. True? Chances are if you are sensing it, it is true. Otherwise you are just kidding yourself and by the time you get back to your studio you will have an email from your client saying something like...“Well now that we’ve thought about it...” Nothing good ever comes after that! If you stop and inquire, you give the client a safe and easy way to voice their opinion right in the moment. People often have a hard time admitting they don’t like something right away – and this “time out” allows for an honest exchange that doesn’t make the client feel bad about not liking something.

## ***7. What’s the best advice you can give creatives to help them present better?***

I always measure what I call the “cringe factor.” How many times a creative does something in a meeting that I wish they wouldn’t. Things like:

- \* Slouching.
- \* Using verbal tics like “um, you know, anyway, kind of, like” and any combination: “you know, like” “anyway, kind of” and “um, you know, kind of” just kills me.
- \* Not speaking confidently about the work.
- \* Disagreeing in a defensive way with anyone in the room.
- \* Not having sound strategic reasons for creating the work that is being presented. I find that strategy takes away a lot of the subjectivity in evaluating creative and if you don’t have a marketing-driven reason for doing something, you might as well be presenting an arts & crafts project.

## ***8. How important are presentation skills for an artist/creative?***

The single most important skill aside from design talent.


---

*Debbie Millman* – Sterling Brands – New York, New York

---

**9. *Anything else you'd like to say on this topic?***

If I had to pick one belief system that I find that many designers have that I believe is the most delusional it is this: that being a successful designer is all about being a fabulously talented designer. It is not. That is only one part of it. Being a fabulously talented designer is essentially achieving what they call in business school “operational excellence.” In the same way that Apple makes great Ipods or Jimmy Choo makes great shoes. But this “fabulous talent” does not guarantee that a company is going to make money.

Just because you have fabulous product (design) does not guarantee you will be a success. I think that in order to be truly successful you must be able to communicate and present WHAT it is about a specific design that is fabulous and inspire people to understand it and feel the same way. So you either have to have an enormous advertising budget – or, in wake of that – or in addition to that, you need to be a strong leader and presenter. Being a great designer is always about being able to communicate what is great. 

To learn more about Debbie and her firm, Sterling Brands, simply visit [www.sterlingbrands.com](http://www.sterlingbrands.com)

Debbie also has an amazing blog at: [www.debbiemillman.blogspot.com](http://www.debbiemillman.blogspot.com)

[www.graphicology.blogspot.com](http://www.graphicology.blogspot.com) – 2006