

## Management & Leadership

### Branson reaches for the stars as new space age begins

SARAH WILD

"LADIES and gentlemen, thank you for choosing Virgin Galactic. Please ensure that your seat brace is fastened, and that your chair and tray table are in the upright position.

"Please do not attempt to eat during the flight, and do not unbuckle your seat brace unless given instructions that you are free to do so. In the case of an emergency ... er ... good luck!"

And with that, the carrier aircraft WhiteKnight II — upon

#### SCIENCE REPORT

which your spacecraft, with the original name of SpaceShipTwo, is piggybacking — takes to the runway at the Mojave Spaceport in New Mexico in the US.

The plane's nose tips into the air, and you're thrust so far into your seat that you can't turn your head. It's at this point, with the force of the jet's acceleration weighing on your lungs, that you wonder whether it was a good idea to fork out \$200 000 for a suburban view of space.

You then realise that the five other people on the spacecraft — excluding the two pilots — were also mad enough to pay an exorbitant amount of money to fly 110km away from the surface of the Earth on a craft that will reach 3 600km/h. And then the epiphany strikes: you're trapped for three-and-a-half hours in an 18m-long tin can, surrounded by crazies, and there's nothing you can do about it.

There are some definite bonuses to make it worthwhile, though. For one, you're going into space — the sphere of Yuri Gagarin and Neil Armstrong; it's the final frontier! The Earth is turning into a patchwork of blue and green below you. And you don't have to crane your neck to see past the woman next to you hogging the view: you have a window on each side of you!

But, the piece de resistance: for six minutes, you get to join that elite club of people who have been weightless in space. (I imagine that it's at this point that you'll be allowed to unbuckle your safety brace.)

And this is only the beginning. Richard Branson has astronomical ambitions for commercial space travel. On Friday, he opened the runway at the New Mexico Spaceport, saying: "This is the beginning of the second space age."

Unfortunately he ruined the gravitas of the moment by grinning and calling the spacecraft his "sexy beast", which hardly instils confidence.

In his best-selling autobiography, *Losing My Virginity*, Branson says: "My interest in life comes from setting myself huge, apparently unachievable challenges and trying to rise above them."

This is one way to rise above them. About 110km above them. And it also means that commercial space travel will become a reality in our lifetime.

In fact, SpaceShipTwo made its maiden voyage in March, and is scheduled to start carrying paying passengers by early 2012.

Unless you have a healthy sense of self-preservation, that is. Or just a fear of flying.

#### SCIENCE SOUND BITES

##### A DOG'S LIFE

Most people notice a wet dog shaking itself only when it's doing it right next to them. However, physicists at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta in the US have turned this fantastic procedure into a viable area of inquiry.

When a wet dog shakes itself, there are two factors at play: the centripetal force of the movement (the force that makes the water droplets follow a path away from the dog) and the surface tension of the water (the force that keeps the water attached to the dog's fur).

The interesting thing that these scientists found was that the dog's size indicates how vigorously it will have to shake to get dry. Unfortunately, they didn't work out how quickly I would have to shake to get rid of all the dirty-canine water after the wet dog does it next to me.

■ *Science writing remains one of Wild's great loves, but she is beginning to wonder if planet hunting is a viable career path.*

# Express yourself and impress others

It's more important than ever to speak well, says Katy Chance

WITH the relentless advance of remote technologies it's a real treat to speak to someone about speaking. That is, one human facing another one and chatting. But is there any point in improving your vocal skills as social media, e-mail, Facebook and the like, make talking a rather redundant communications medium?

"Fortunately," says John French, founder and co-owner of Corporate Intelligence Training, "we can't get away from being human. We are emotional beings regardless of all the technology, and the spoken voice remains our greatest tool of self-expression."

Cape Town-based French has spent 15 years in vocal training, has a degree in speech and drama and is a licentiate and teacher of the South African Guild of Speech and Drama. He started his studies, however, with an LLB at Wits University and spent his vacations working in the legal world in Joburg.

While so much communication is written (or that particular written vernacular, "texting"), French is in favour of any technology that encourages communication; however, the written word can cause problems due to its creating a permanent record.

As a writer, I'm well aware of how little control I have over the way my words are read. The old gag about "you read it just like I wrote it" has its basis in the reality that the receivers of information use their personal

filters to decide on aspects of "emotional tone".

"Unavoidably, we all filter received communication and make it 'fit' our own world views. With the written word, the nonverbal triggers such as body language, tone and facial expression are taken out of the equation. When sending a written communication, you need to think of three things, as if you were the receiver: what would I think, how would I feel, and how would I react?"

For French, "the most meaningful and honest form of communication remains face to face". It's also the medium in which the speaker has the most control over how a message is received. There is less potential for incorrect inference when you are what French calls a "conscious communicator".

"Life is a lot easier for effective communicators. Life is about engaging with other people and the more you improve your communication skills, the easier that becomes. At school we're taught to stand up and deliver and we often learn to hate and fear speaking."

Reciting poetry isn't communicating; nor is "trying to impress rather than express".

"Our training is very experiential. It involves a lot of psychological aspects such as addressing personal stress triggers, understanding why you go 'blank'. Clients learn how to think and speak on their feet, and how to never get 'stuck'. It's about freeing people up to prove to themselves — or an audience

of 5 000 — that the same personal principles apply."

A study at the University of California concluded that words account for just 7% of the final message; the way you use your voice is 38%. The manner really is the message.

According to the Gallup International Poll on Vocal Habits, mumbling irritates 37% of people; talking too loudly 32%; while a boring and monotonous voice irritates 27%.

**Today, time is money and people are under pressure to get information clearly and quickly**

I attend a lot of business presentations and, like all audiences according to French, I am not particularly tolerant. I expect presentations to be without hesitation, deviation or repetition, and to hold my attention. If not, I assume (subconsciously), the message is boring too.

I'm looking for what in radio is called light and shade in delivery; French calls it vocal dynamism — energising your voice, eliminating stress from it and making it stronger and more resonant.

"The longest we'll tolerate a monotonous delivery is about 90 seconds. Today, time is money and people are under pressure to get information clearly and



VOCE FORTE: John French, founder and co-owner of Corporate Intelligence Training, believes the spoken voice remains our greatest tool of self-expression and trains people to make the most of it. Picture: MARTIN RHODES

quickly. By not optimising their delivery, speakers can undermine their own message. It's about the laws of attraction and mirroring; if you're nervous or bored in your presentation, this will be reflected in the response of the audience."

And the higher up the ladder you are, the higher the expectations will be. "In my experience, leadership is a lonely place," says French. "The assumption is the more senior and more degrees a speaker has, the more accomplished they will be."

It's certainly assumed the higher up the ladder, the better your PowerPoint presentation will be. French rolls his eyes. "Often this is a cop-out and you

end up competing with your own visual aids! Some people don't like attention and essentially say: 'Look at the screen, not me.' They're actually giving their power away to the slides."

French's clients range from politicians and board members to truck drivers and receptionists. From MBA students to school leavers, "the need never ends".

"The voice is a metaphor for people's personal psychology. Any trauma or tension is reflected in the voice. And tension is poison for the voice."

Consequently, there is no "one-voice-fits-all" vocal training, which some people confuse with

being the "correct" elocution and well-modulated BBC World Service-type delivery of old. Just as conscious communicators are flexible and can, and must, alter delivery according to different audiences, French and his trainers adapt their training to each client's unique profile.

"Logical types can be more analytical and cerebral, but this can lead to a flat delivery as they are sometimes not in tune with nonverbal nuances. Marketing types can be too garrulous and impulsive.

"There is a subtlety and sensitivity in communication nowadays. People are not as accepting of the bad stuff! And too expressive can be seen as

too strong, and hard sell is not effective in the 21st century."

French has worked with bankers in Bangkok, a culture so inherently quiet and polite that conflict resolution — "always better achieved with speaking, rather than writing" — doesn't even warrant a raised voice.

He's worked with a CEO of a multinational, who was so constantly apologetic for his "perceived errors" when speaking that he undermined his own position and authority — and thus his message.

He also recalls theatre impresario Pieter Toerien calling a few years ago, asking for help with a world-class operatic singer whose voice seized up. Nobody could help her.

"I worked with her and four days later she was on stage. She told me she sang like never before. So much in cases like this are based on the psychology of vocal delivery. It's emotionally based, and our emotions will always show in our voice."

Speakers with no confidence have their message masked by fear and insecurity. Speakers with too much have it masked by bravado and a presentation bordering on performance.

You need to sell yourself before the message, says French. The first impression is often a vocal one. If you don't get that right, you won't get the message right. Writers have the luxury of self-editing, revising, moulding and tweaking before they press save; according to French, with the right training you can pretty much learn to do the same with your voice.

"People judge you in the first seven to 15 seconds on the image your voice conveys. In fact, nowadays you can judge a presenter even before they get up! You can see if they look stressed, if they're organised, do they look confident? This is why you need to learn to promote yourself; if you don't, something terrible happens. Nothing."

chancek@bdfm.co.za

## Drivel — no longer a male preserve

WHO talks more management nonsense, men or women?

I thought I knew the answer to this most intriguing of questions: the man beats the woman every time. This is partly because men are fonder of the sporting metaphor, and like to step up to the plate while raising the bar on their bench strength.

But it's also because the point of jargon is either to make you sound big or as a substitute for thought, and women are less keen on sounding big, and less inclined to speak before they have worked out what, if anything, they have to say.

However, several things have happened to me recently to make me doubt the superiority of men at talking guff. The first was a lunch I attended for top women in business. As these women held forth, there was an orgy of "reaching out" and "delivering value" and "going forward" that would have made any man feel quite at home.

The next day I was sent the programme for the biggest women's jamboree the world has ever seen. This week, 30 000 women will gather in Long Beach and another million will follow online an event organised by Maria Shriver, the First Lady of California, at which Michelle Obama, Meg Whitman and Billie Jean King will each say their bit.

The promotional video for the event shows Shriver talking a blue streak of drivel.

"Being who we are is in fact the greatest gift that we can give ourselves, our community and our world," she says.

Is being who I am a gift? Or is it a tautology? If it is the best gift I can give, then that's a shame for myself, our community and our world, as we all surely deserve better.

The point of the conference is to empower, educate and inspire women to be "Architects of Change®". But it's not quite clear to me why anyone would want to be such a thing. An architect is someone who designs a building and then invariably falls out with the builders who build it and the clients who pay for it. And if I wanted to be an architect, the last thing I'd want to architect (now perfectly acceptable as a verb in management circles) would be change, in general. Good change is good, bad change is bad, and sometimes the status quo is the best of all.

You might think I'm being a bit mean. After all, this is California, and this programme is aimed at all women, not just bright ones. Indeed, one of the



Lucy Kellaway

"breakout conversations" is titled: "Are you comfortable in a bathing suit?"

There is no such excuse for the Women on Wall Street who are also having their annual knees-up this week.

The WOWS invitation begins: "What stands between you and your next big breakthrough?"

I know the answer already: laziness and other people.

"How do your perspectives influence whether or not you can turn that innovative idea into an actionable initiative?"

Leaving perspectives aside, I don't see why anyone would want to make an idea into an actionable initiative in the first place. The only good idea on Wall Street is to make money, and there are no pat answers as to how one does that.

What all this tells us is not that all women talk drivel, but that everyone talks drivel when they start thinking about women as a general topic.

Indeed, now even saying the word "women" is too blunt for some. A reader who has just returned from an Akzo Nobel meeting tells me that to promote board diversity the company is looking for candidates with a "female background".

This is a most interesting development. Are they looking for transgender directors to sit on the board? Or people who were brought up in households where women predominated?

The very second that I was pondering this, an e-mail landed from the Association for Psychological Science with the subject line: "Too many sisters affect male sexuality."

It said various experiments had been most rigorously conducted on rats, the upshot of which was that rats brought up with lots of sisters spent less time mounting other rats than those brought up with males.

So here is my actionable initiative that will make me an Architect of Change®. Selection committees should find out how many sisters a man has before giving him a job. Too many sisters may not teach a man how to talk properly, but they do teach him how to behave.

©2010 The Financial Times

**WinEX**  
RAND MERCHANT BANK  
WINE FESTIVAL

**3 NIGHTS ONLY**

**Sandton Convention Centre**  
**27 to 29 October**  
**5pm-9pm**

Book at [winex.co.za](http://winex.co.za)  
Computicket

**RMB**

**BusinessDay**  
NEWS WORTH KNOWING

**702 TALK RADIO**

**RMB Private Bank**

**BRITISH AIRWAYS**  
Operated by Comair