

**BREAK A LEG DEPT.**

## Acting Lessons

Business leaders from many industries pay top dollar for a few hours with a former TV producer. Meet Jerry Weissman, the man behind the man behind the podium.

By **James Daly**

Photographs by **Anne Hamersky**

**A**LL THE WORLD'S A STAGE, said the Bard, but any business executive who has slipped into the podium's death grip while speaking in front of a skeptical audience knows how nerve-racking that stage can be.

Increasingly, venture capitalists and Fortune 500 corporate managers alike are sneaking out for lessons with an acting coach. Their mission: to improve their dramatic skills. They're not brushing up on doing Stanley Kowalski in summer stock but instead are learning the best way to engage an audience (their customers), entertain them (deliver the hook), and leave them wanting more (close the deal).

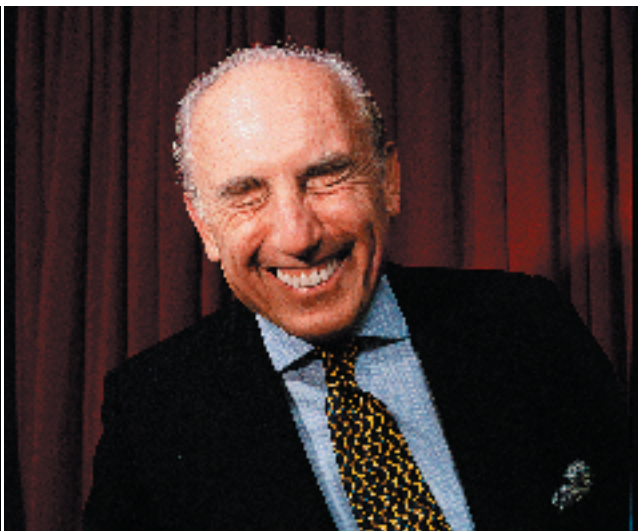
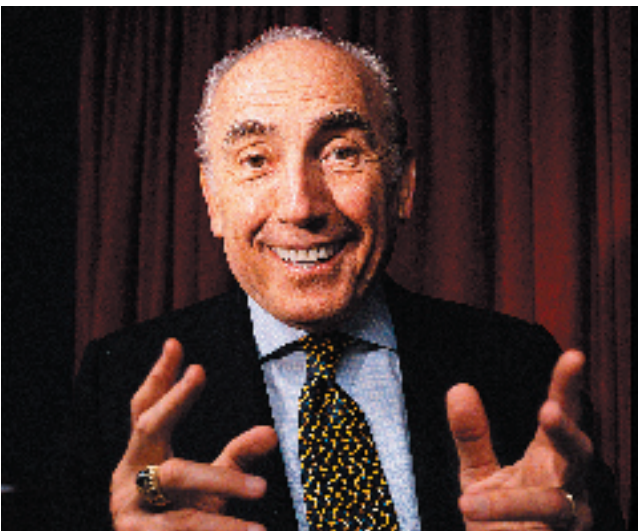
That's where Jerry Weissman comes in. Weissman, a former TV producer who spent a decade at CBS, is one of the busiest acting coaches you've never heard of. Rather than tutor budding Hollywood studs and starlets, Weissman works with business executives—thousands of them—who must sell themselves and their products.

“Most business is about telling a story,” says Weissman. “The problem is that no one knows how to tell a story. But the bigger problem is that no one knows that they don't know how to tell a story.”

### THE PERCEPTIONIST

**E**xecutives go to great lengths to appear at ease in front of an audience. The chief of a Silicon Valley software company even reportedly worked with a stand-up comedian to hone his onstage chops. The king of business presentation, though, is Weissman. He has coached more than 10,000 business executives, including Yahoo! Vice Chairman Tim Koogle, Intuit founder Scott Cook, and Microsoft CEO Bill Gates.

Weissman's website is littered with testimonials from business leaders, all of whom swear by his lessons. “Vinod Khosla, a partner



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with Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, points out in his endorsement that perception can be more powerful than reality.

“I don’t know anybody who has more experience than Jerry in creating great perceptions,” Khosla writes.

“Clear, concise, and high-impact communications are necessary for every business executive in today’s high-speed world. Jerry Weissman provides leaders with simple tools,” notes Sue Bostrom, senior vice president at Cisco.

Tom Koogle was president and CEO of Yahoo! and an industry veteran when he and a number of coworkers used Weissman to gear up for the company’s pre-IPO road show in the spring of 1996. “He taught us how not to look nervous as hell even though we were,” Koogle says.

Weissman’s key point, according to Koogle: get your story down in an engaging and succinct manner. “You don’t want to spend your entire pitch meeting boiling down the ocean,” says Koogle. “You’ve got a very limited time. Use your time on that stage wisely.”

Weissman’s specialty is working with executives going on the IPO road show, an intense series of meetings with potential investors that precedes an initial public offering of company stock.

These grueling meetings stretch over many weeks and miles and can exhaust and befuddle unseasoned executives. Training with Weissman, which costs between \$8,000 and \$10,000 a day, can ease the strain, say former students.

One tip Weissman offers involves speaking to one person. “Don’t just sweep the room with your eyes,” he says. “Look at one person until you feel them looking back.”

A final piece of advice from the master: Never start a presentation with a joke. “You weren’t hired for your ability to tell a joke,” Weissman says. “You were hired for your business expertise. Better to make your audience smarter than leave them laughing.”