

Frits van Paasschen

BigSpeak Podcast Interview

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- Mark Sylvester: Welcome to the show. I'm Mark Sylvester, and I am thrilled today to have Frits van Paasschen with us. Frits, when I look at your bio - global executive, author, former CEO of Starwood Hotels, former CEO of Coors, worked at Nike, world traveler, 114 countries - first off, thanks for taking a few minutes to talk to us, and welcome to the show.
- Frits van P.: It's great to be on with you. I've been looking forward to this.
- Mark Sylvester: When we're looking at speaking and having a speaking career, I'm really curious, because you're an executive and you're used to communicating, you're used to communicating in front of large groups of people. What was it that let you know that you could be a keynote speaker? Is it in your DNA, or was it something you learned?
- Frits van P.: I think it's something I learned. You know, it's an interesting confluence of a couple of things. First, when I became a CEO, I realized that if you want to speak to a large organization, literally speak them, you have to have a stage presence, and so I spent a lot of time with coaches learning how to be more effective as a communicator in front of people. I'm not a natural.
- The second is, when I left and I stopped being a CEO, I wrote a book and I got a lot of requests from people to come and talk about the book, and that evolved into a keynote speaking career. I had no idea that I was embarking on this, but it seems as though all these things I've been doing along the way turned out to be really good preparation for it.
- Mark Sylvester: It wasn't part of a grand plan?
- Frits van P.: Absolutely not, and I think planning is overrated. I believe in strategy not planning.
- Mark Sylvester: Okay, no, I love that. With the coaches, you said to yourself, "I need to get a coach to help me with this." Give me an example of one of those coaches in your head that you hear every time just before you step on a stage.
- Frits van P.: One of the first things that goes through my mind, it starts to dawn on me that I'm about to go up in front of an audience is, I've done this before, it's worked,

I'm going to do it again. I consciously put aside any negative thoughts. The thought that goes through my mind when I'm actually speaking in front of an audience, which is from one of the coaches that I worked with is, to spend time looking at individuals in the audience and try to make that visual connection.

I find after a while, you start to get a feel for the audience as though they were one thing, and you can tell whether they think you're funny, whether they're interested in something a little bit more analytical, whether they want to have another story. I've learned to be able to adapt my speaking style and even the content based on that visual contact. That's something that I had to be very conscious of because it's quite easy when you talk to an audience to gaze at the group overall, and not pick people out and try to make that connection as though you were talking one-to-one.

Mark Sylvester: It's interesting that the civilian public or the non-speaking public thinks of that advice that just look out over the back of the crowd and you don't isolate on anyone, yet in fact, that's absolutely the wrong way to do it because you're having a conversation with one person at a time than another person.

Frits van P.: That's right, and suddenly it humanizes the audience, and it makes it really as though you were talking to a few people. What's interesting about speaking to a large audience is it's unnatural, and yet talking to any subset of that audience would feel perfectly natural.

Mark Sylvester: We talked at the top of the show about the areas where you have domain expertise, and then you wrote your book. By the way, how long did it take you to write that book?

Frits van P.: A friend of mine told me, "If you write a book, start to finish, and really write it yourself, you should plan at about five hours a page." Actually, that was about right - 300 pages, 1,500 hours, and over the span of about 15 months, so three or four hours, not quite every day.

Mark Sylvester: With that body of knowledge all encapsulated in the book, is that the expertise that you're bringing to the stage each time you talk?

Frits van P.: I think so. The book, for me, was a way of gathering my thoughts. I felt like I had learned so much in rapid succession being a CEO for over a decade, and then all the work that I'd done before that. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had the luxury of being able to say, "You know what? I don't need to go find a job tomorrow. I want to think about all the things that I've learned and seen, and try to work that into a coherent thread." If I'm honest, I feel like now that I've been talking about the book, I could write a much better book than the one I wrote.

Mark Sylvester: You have another book in you, that's what I just heard.

Frits van P.: Well, I don't know about that. I think, actually, I'd like to re-write the same book, just do a better job with it.

Mark Sylvester: Now one of the things that happens, and I'm curious if this happens to you, where you have a set piece, a specific talk - I think you've got probably three of four that you give - do you work with organizers well in advance, can understand the audience, and how much variant do you do in each talk from show to show?

Frits van P.: There's two things I like to do to prepare. One, is to have that conversation with the organizer or the organization head, whoever's sponsoring me to come in and talk, ahead of time and understand a little bit more about context and content. If I can do it, I love to be there the night before or even at breakfast, spend some time just listening to people and get a feel for the organization and for people, and especially if I can pick up little things that are fun to work into the conversation so people feel like I'm not just speaking generically.

I would say I have one body of knowledge that I draw from, and depending on the audience, I pick parts of that, and I'll elaborate in different ways, depending on what I think fits with the situation or the question or the theme of the meeting that they're attending. As I said, sometimes I even work in some adaptation, depending on how the talk is going in real time.

Mark Sylvester: That's a skillset right there because that's improvisational. You have a message, you know where you're going with this, but being able to feel the room and get a sense of what's landing and what's not landing.

Frits van P.: Yeah, I remember in high school we used have a class where you'd have to write a paper, and then come to class and read it around the table, everybody would read their paper. There were times when I left out paragraphs, and I would just wing it, pretend to be reading while I was sitting there, so this improv skill, I think, is a bit of the nature of the beast. There are certain advantages to it and I suppose there are also some bad habits that can be a result of it.

Mark Sylvester: I'm sure that served you well as a CEO.

Frits van P.: I think one of the things about being a CEO is, you're constantly in a situation where you feel like you're winging it, or even though you're the one who has to make the decision, everybody else in the room has way more expertise than you do. I think, personally in my case, because I went from Nike to Coors to Starwood and jumped across industries, I never had the industry expertise that most of the people reporting to me did, let alone the rest of the organization. Part of winging it is making sure you spend as much time as you can listening and making sure that people feel like they can tell you what they really think.

Mark Sylvester: What is it you think about that diversity of experience - I call it boundary spanning. It's going wildly different disciplines - has made you uniquely qualified to give the kind of talks that you give?

Frits van P.: I think people are motivated in their careers by different things. For some people it's ambition or status or money. In all candor, I think in my case, more than else, it was curiosity and this element of adrenaline about, can I do this? Go to Europe and run Nike's business there, having only ever run a P&L for a year and half before that, and suddenly you've got \$2.5 billion worth of revenue you're trying to grow; or coming to Coors, where the company had lost market share and volume for seven quarters in a row; or coming into Starwood, where the corporate culture was fragmented by a series of leadership changes.

There's always that element of that Mission Impossible song coming into the room that makes you, I think, hyper aware, and gives you that sense of trying to learn and absorb and be productive as soon as possible. I think that same fundamental sense of adventure and curiosity is what can make for someone being a good speaker because you want to take people with you on those adventures.

It's like they say about writing, you want to show and not tell. You want to bring someone to that moment where you realize what you were doing was completely misguided, and get them to come with you and say, "All right, we've all been here. Now let me talk to you about some of the things that I learned from that and some of the mistakes that I made that, hopefully, you can avoid."

Mark Sylvester: How much of your talks are based around stories, and how important is story to you?

Frits van P.: I try to toggle between story and content. I would say really the story telling part is maybe a quarter, but it's the integration of those stories in the content that I think helps. I would say stories maybe 25%, examples 25%, and then content, structure and transition might be the rest. I haven't analyzed it, but gut feel, I think that's where it is.

Mark Sylvester: I'm constantly analyzing speakers and communication styles and short form and long form. Is there a specific length that you feel is just perfect for your message?

Frits van P.: I think I can maintain the energy level and the rapport with an audience best for somewhere between, let's say, 30 and 40 minutes. Less than that, I think, can be very powerful if you're super well edited, and in a way, it's the classic Mark Twain - the shorter letter is harder to write than the longer one.

If I'm really tight, you can hold someone for that TED Talk length, that 16 to 18 minutes, let's say. If I have an hour and people really want me to be on stage for an hour, I much prefer getting to Q&A and being able to work with people and

hear specific questions and try to draw parallels between different questions that I've had or something that I spoke about earlier. I think that also gives an audience what I call entrance points.

We all let our minds wander at a certain point, and a lot of times, someone will ask a question, and it's almost like you're starting anew with the talk. People look up from their phones or their reverie, and they're back into what you're talking about.

Mark Sylvester: It's interesting you mentioned the TED Talk. TED is big about the ideas worth spreading. What's the core idea for you Frits?

Frits van P.: The core idea from my perspective is this: we're living in a world of accelerating change, and that change is both in terms of steady timelines, but also these abrupt, disruptive changes. We as human beings in the organizations that we've created are not well suited to an accelerating pace of change. That creates both dangers as well as opportunities, and it's really exploring how we can get better at coping with change and understand the patterns of disruption and the kinds of things that prevent us from adapting that, I think, become an interesting topic to talk about.

Mark Sylvester: One of the things, I think, makes a great talk is that there's a call to action, it's just not motivation, but there's activation in some sense. What are the various calls to action that you're trying to drop into your talks?

Frits van P.: What I'm trying to have people appreciate is that thanks to cognitive bias, thanks to entrenched habits, vested interests, all these barriers to change that are inherently human, that if we believe that somehow doing the same thing in the future is going to yield the same result, we're going to be misguided. It's almost like the new definition of insanity. This used be doing the same thing, expecting a different result. I think having people step back and go, "Wait a minute, I've been successful or we've been successful up until now because we've been doing A, B, and C. Unless we completely change that, we're sealing our own fate, and we're going to have our own Kodak moment."

Mark Sylvester: Given a choice of audiences, is there an audience that more resonates with that message than others, or is there a universal theme there?

Frits van P.: That's a great question. The people I find are most receptive are folks that have had to live through some version of the negative side of disruptive change already. The hardest audience are the ones who are saying, "yeah, yeah, I get it. That must be really hard for some people, but we're okay." They're the most fun audience if you can get them to start to have that [inaudible 00:14:44] of fear and understanding and moment of realization.

The easiest folks are guys who've already got a couple scars from this, or nodding thinking, yeah, yeah, you're right. Oh boy, gosh, you hadn't thought of

that. If I can get some insight into their particular business and toss out a few "have you thought abouts?" that can, I think, engage an audience and get them to say, "Yeah, wow, this is going to change how I think about where we're headed and what we're doing."

Mark Sylvester: As a speaker, you're standing up there, that talk is woven in the fabric of who you are. You're forgetting all of that and just letting it flow and you're reading the audience as you said earlier. As you step off the stage, what was the most fun moment for you during that talk?

Frits van P.: You used the word flow, it was actually going through my mind as well. I remember reading about what makes things fun, and it's when you're so in the moment, you forget about where you are and what's happening. There are those points, I think, in any performance, and let's face it, giving a good talk is a performance, where - and this sounds slightly cosmic, but - it's almost an out-of-body experience. You're so engaged in what you're saying, where you want to go next, the feedback you're getting from that energy of the audience, that you lose yourself.

What I've found so interesting is, there have been times where afterwards, I'll turn to one of my friends or colleagues and say, "Did I mention this, this, or this?," because I completely don't even remember whether I did. There's this interesting sympathetic process that goes on where your brain takes over in an interesting way, and it really is this interesting separation from yourself. Those moments, I think, are exhilarating.

Mark Sylvester: It's that surrender, right?

Frits van P.: Yeah.

Mark Sylvester: I'm a martial artist, and it's when we train, train, train, train. I know you rehearse, you rehearse, rehearse, but when you step on the mat, you have to let all that go and you have to not think. When you step onto the stage, you have to not think, and that's when the flow state happens, and it doesn't happen all the time, but when it does, it's great, isn't?

Frits van P.: It's powerful. What's that line from Mike Tyson, everybody has a plan until they get punched?

Mark Sylvester: Well it sounds like you bring the experience of businesses getting punched and having to come back. In each of the examples you gave, they were distress situations in one way or another, and you came in and figured that out. Through your talks and through the book that you've written and the ideas that you put out there, you, I think, give people the idea that they, in fact, could punch back as well and figure out how to do that.

I've got one last question for you. It's curious about working with BigSpeak because I know you've been with them just recently, but you've been speaking a lot. How is it that you guys found one another?

Frits van P.: A friend of mine from college put me in touch with someone who had been doing a lot of speaking, and while he had not worked directly with BigSpeak, he spoke of some of the different agencies that work with speakers. Based on his description and, ultimately, an introduction, that's how I first got put in touch with BigSpeak. It's been wonderful working with them.

I finally met one of the BigSpeak folks in person. I gave a talk earlier this week, and she happened to be in her home town, so we had a chance to talk before and after.

Mark Sylvester: Oh great.

Frits van P.: It was great, yeah. I really enjoyed that, and I love the fact that they are very professional, and yet, as far as I can tell, not in the least bit pretentious. That's a great combination, at least as far as I'm concerned.

Mark Sylvester: I love that. That'll be our t-shirt, right? I love that - not pretentious. Well, Frits, thank you so much for spending some time with us and helping us better understand and get to know you a little bit better. We'll look forward to seeing you on a stage some time soon.

Frits van P.: Fantastic. What a pleasure, I really enjoyed this. I hope we have a chance to talk again and to meet in person.

Mark Sylvester: Thanks Frits. Buh-bye.

Frits van P.: Buh-bye. See you.

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