As designers, we are always looking to improve our skills by taking online design tutorials, going to Photoshop classes, buying design books and magazines, going to seminars, and more.

But we don't often make time for improving one of the most important skills of all – a skill crucial to career success. I'm talking about our communication skills.

As a design business owner, I found out in a hurry how important verbal communication skills are when I started giving client presentations and learned that mine were not as "professional" as some of the others they had seen. Ouch! Losing clients because of that really hurt.

But it gave me motivation to improve my communication skills. And after doing some investigating, I stumbled upon the Toastmasters Program. This nonprofit organization has nearly 226,000 members in 11,500 clubs in 92 countries. They offer a proven, affordable, structured, and fun way to practice and hone communication and leadership skills.

Most Toastmasters clubs have approximately 20 members who meet weekly for an hour or two. Participants learn and practice their skills by giving prepared and impromptu speeches, as well as by serving as timer, evaluator, or grammarian.

There is no instructor. Instead, the speeches and meetings are critiqued by members in a positive manner, focusing on what was done right and what could be improved.

If speaking in public scares you, you aren't alone, says Paul L. Witt, PhD, assistant professor of communication studies at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. "It is even scarier than rattlesnakes," Witt says. "The idea of making a presentation in public is the No. 1 fear reported by people in the U.S."

That's pretty much how I felt the night I was to give my first "icebreaker" speech. But somehow, I did it. I presented my speech, met some wonderful people, and eventually completed the program.

Like writing or design, good verbal communication skills can be learned and practiced by anybody.
Here are four guidelines from Toastmasters that will help you improve your communication skills immediately:

1. Learn to Listen.

It is helpful to initially put yourself in the position of being the interviewer. Just let the other person talk. Ask questions and listen to the answers. Resist the temptation to talk about yourself or your business. You'll have a chance to do that later.

2. Create Logic and Structure.

The basic Toastmasters tenet is: Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell it to them, and then tell them what you just told them. If you make sure your presentation has a logical structure, it will be 10 times more likely to be followed and remembered.

3. Practice to Improve.

This one came as a shock to me when I started with Toastmasters. I thought professional speakers used an outline and just "did" their presentations. WAY wrong. The pros rehearse their talks many, many times – getting the rhythm and pacing just right. Once I learned to practice, my presentations improved dramatically.

4. Solicit Feedback.

Constructive criticism is necessary to monitor your improvement. And there are a number of feedback mechanisms used in the Toastmasters program: a timer (because it is important to cover your key points in a specific time), an ahhhh and ummm counter (which makes you aware of your verbal "stammers," and, of course, feedback from audience members who pick up on things like body language, voice projection, and more.

Survey after survey shows that presentation skills are crucial to success – your success. Make it a goal to improve your communication skills in the next six months by signing up for Toastmasters or taking advantage of a video, online, or seminar-based program on public speaking and leadership skills.

Then watch your profits explode.
Doug Farrick has over 20 years of experience in the design business, the last five owning a successful design firm. Since selling it in 2007, he founded TheDesignersInnerCircle.com – a resource center for graphic designers. Get his report "27 Hot Graphic Design Profit Boosting Tips" and TDIC "Tip of the Week" at: [http://www.thedesignersinnercircle.com](http://www.thedesignersinnercircle.com)

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