



Feature: Interview



JIM LAWLESS, ONE OF EUROPE'S MOST POPULAR CONFERENCE SPEAKERS, SPEAKS TO HOSPITALITY & EVENTS NORTH ABOUT HIS RISE TO THE TOP, FULFILLING CHALLENGES HEAD ON AND THE ART OF PRODUCING ENGAGING CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS.

Jim Lawless has plenty to talk about. He has wowed audiences with his inimitable presenting style, developed a model for personal and business achievement and worked with individuals and groups within organisations including Apple, Barclays and Rolls Royce. But less than a decade ago, he never envisaged he'd be speaking to conference rooms full of people about overcoming fear to achieve goals. In fact, it was his own fear that nearly halted his speaking career before it even got off the ground. He was the CEO of a change consultancy when a client suggested he do a motivational speech. "I thought it all sounded very razzmatazz and it was something I'd never thought about doing," recalls Jim. "It turned out to be a disaster! I was booked for an hour and only managed to do 30 minutes. I was so nervous that I missed out huge chunks of what I'd meant to say." Nevertheless, a member of the audience saw his potential and asked Jim to speak at another event and from there his reputation, and speaking skills, grew. Today he speaks at around 100 conferences a year, from internal company conferences to industry-wide events of over 1,000 delegates, and is usually booked to either open or close a conference.

He's one of the few, perhaps only, inspirational speakers to have developed a model for personal and business achievement. Jim's Ten Rules for Taming Tigers is a practical approach to overcoming fear to achieve things you never thought you could do. Jim explains: "The Tiger is the voice of fear we hear when we're faced with a risk. The Ten Rules can be applied to different subject matters, from taking steps in terms of leadership through to sales." Proving that he puts his money where his mouth is, Jim responded to an audience challenge by going from an overweight, non-riding business consultant to riding his first televised race as a jockey in just 12 months. "No one's dared challenge

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Having started his professional life as a lawyer and subsequently trained as an actor, Jim's attributes of understanding delivery and having the ability to perform in front of an audience may have been in place before he embarked on a speaking career, but he maintains: "It's not difficult to hold an audience's attention. It's a craft that can be taught. The bigger test is that the audience is engaged for the longer term; when the Tiger is being talked about a week or a month later, that's the real test. I've had guys that run sales teams take on what I've said and have subsequently become the top selling sales team within their company."

Jim isn't in the business of divulging vast amounts of information but of generating a buzz and getting the audience excited. "I went to lots of conferences (in his former career as a consultant) and found they were too heavy on information and too low on leadership and inspiration. After all, it's theatre - 500 people in a room, lights, a stage; someone standing up giving a tedious debate on marketing objectives isn't going to work. My job is to generate excitement. I create this by assisting people in picturing in their heads a place they want to be. I use anecdotes and stories to help them tell their own stories about their own life."

Humour is a hallmark of Jim's presentations: "If I don't make the audience laugh, I'm just a preacher." But whether an audience laughs in the right places or not, Jim says it's important for the speaker to remain unfazed, whatever the reaction: "Don't let the Tiger get to you so you end up hiding behind the lectern because the audience, on the surface, doesn't appear to be with you. In my experience, audiences vary massively. Some will roar with laughter, some will sit quietly which usually means they're taking what you're saying on board." ■