Never picture your audience naked

This and other tips can be found in a new book on public speaking by two S'poreans, reports JAMIE LEE

You can battle stage-fright with preparation, practice, perhaps even by imagining yourself as a superman on stage.

But never by picturing your audience naked, suggests a new book on public speaking by two young Singaporeans passionate about the craft.

Eric Feng—who coaches corporate clients on making speeches—and undergraduate Andrew Zhan, 21, decided to publish a book on public speaking when they realised many people still have nagging questions about what makes a good presentation.

"Casually asked my online subscribers and clients a question: If you get to spend one hour with world class speakers for a one-on-one, personal consultation on public speaking, what would you ask them?" Mr Feng told BT in an email interview.

"To my surprise, my inbox was flooded with truckloads of questions. It was then I realised that even with all the books out there on public speaking, people around the world still have so many unanswered questions—questions that if answered, will help them significantly in their career or school," said the 25-year-old, who has let his coaching business to his partner (not Mr Zhan) to run while he serves out his scholarship bond under the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore.

Mr Feng and Mr Zhan set out this year to answer the questions, many of which were posted on @blog.ericfeng.com—Mr Feng's blog which enjoys more than 6,000 visits a month.

Their goal is to reach out to more people with a book that goes beyond generic advice such as "speak with confidence," says Mr Feng, an NCS employee who is currently on a six-month work attachment in Sri Lanka.

Mr Zhan, a business student at Singapore Management University, noted: "This book is marketable because there is a strong need for it in the first place. There are people who seriously need to improve their public speaking skills or who want to overcome their fear of public speaking."

The book—The FAQ Book on Public Speaking—will be introduced in an electronic version at end-September and as a hard copy by Christmas.

Ms Ang, whom Feng met at her hosting class, said she agreed to help because she found him to be "very bright, sincere and enthusiastic." At the same time, she had already intended to launch a book of a similar nature, but hadn't decided the topic to write on.

Mr Feng said he is impressed with Ms Ang's "knack for making people laugh at will" and has clearly "unlaid" her experiences. "Humour is not to be confused with jokes. Jokes usually backfire in a speech because they are unoriginal and crude." Ms Ang wrote in a chapter, adding that to be funny calls for being observant, to be able to point out the quirky side of ordinary things.

Mr Feng's virtual experience with addressing an audience was so bad he swore off public speaking for five years.

When he was a student at Anderson Secondary School, he won a science speech contest and was asked to give his winning speech "Nuclear Energy: Peace or Panic" to the entire school.

"I did a terrible job in front of 600 students and teachers. I doubt anyone remembers since they were busy listening to me half the time. The students were busy chatting with their friends while the teachers were furiously marking their books," he recounted.

He picked up public speaking skills again when he became an ambassador for the School of Computing at the National University of Singapore, joining the university's Toastmasters Club and going for speech classes.

In 2005, Mr Feng went on a one-year exchange programme at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and subsequently joined a Toastmasters Club there. He then represented Philadelphia at the divisional level of the Toastmasters International Humorous Contest, and took the division-level title for a speech entitled "There's something about Singapore," in which he "told them how silly they are in getting us mixed up with China."

For that, Feng was featured as one of the top 25 "alternate achievers" of 2006 in The Strait Times. Upon reading the BT article, Mr Zhan visited Mr Feng's blog and was inspired. He finally got around to emailing Mr Feng this year with a 50-page business proposal to publish a book on public speaking, detailing marketing strategies and running out the competition.

"I was very touched by his determination and conviction. And that's why I decided we should work together," said Mr Feng.

The team plans to produce a second edition of the book and to use other media, such as print programmes, to answer burning questions, said Mr Feng, adding that they are also underway to produce an idea's guide on other topics including financial planning and personal grooming.

One chapter of The FAQ Book on Public Speaking is available free online at some theFAQbook.com. The eBook will be priced at US$29.90 for the first 200 copies. After the early bird promotion, it will be priced at US$49.90. In addition, the first 20 BT readers to send a public speaking-related question to AskEric@ericfeng.com will get a personal reply from Mr Feng.