

Show, don't tell: A CEO defies dyslexia

The founder of secondhand furniture retailer Terri's Consign learned to run her business through pictures.

By [Terri Bowersock](#)

April 2, 2008: 10:23 AM EDT

TEMPE, ARIZ. (FORTUNE Small Business) -- With a \$2,000 loan from my mother, I have grown my Tempe-based firm, [Terri's Consign & Design Furnishings](#), into the largest U.S. resale furniture retailer, with 16 stores and \$36 million in annual sales. And I've done it despite my dyslexia.

I wasn't always open about my learning disability. Because I was teased in school, I became a master at "faking it until you make it." In meetings I'd pretend I could read the papers being passed out.

In reality I was hanging onto everyone's words, hoping to keep up. I was also embarrassed by my handwriting - it's cursive until I get confused. Then I resort to print. I'd make excuses for not writing things out. "Oh, you couldn't read my writing anyway - I'll just tell you!"

But when Terri's Consign opened its first franchise, I realized that I didn't have to fake it anymore. I had made it. So I decided to be upfront about my dyslexia and finally began to run my business on my terms.

When we needed a manual for future franchisees, I was totally honest, and said I couldn't do it. Instead, I hired a writer. To teach my staff the manual's contents, I got an 11- by 14-inch sketchpad and drew it all out.

All my presentations - even the ones I give to the bank - are done in crayon and pencil. It seems odd, but using color helps me get the full picture and distinguish concepts. With illustrations in hand, I meet with my top four executives to explain the ideas. They in turn pass my thoughts on to their departments - either verbally or in art form. If it's the latter, my assistant, who is also a graphic designer, turns my drawings into polished posters.

Most CEOs bark out orders through mass e-mail. But I don't even own a computer. It's easier for me to get on the phone and call each of my employees. They think I'm the friendliest person in the world because I take the time to talk to them. It's too hard for me to remember and spell all those last names, so the entries in my little red phone book consist of first names and physical or personality traits I use to describe each individual.

I also carry a tape recorder with me always. Writing notes takes me too long, so often I'll just have people speak into the recorder, or I'll speak into it myself so that I can check my "notes" later. Recorders are also built into my phone. Going without an e-mail system doesn't bother me because I manage my voicemail in-box and outbox the same way - I just listen instead of read. I've tried voice-recognition software, but found its instructions too complicated.

People ask if I attribute my success to overcoming dyslexia. I tell them that I haven't, and never will, overcome dyslexia. Yes, I run a national company, but I'm still using a Franklin Talking Dictionary to try to spell fifth-grade vocabulary words.

At least I've shown my grade school teachers that it's not that I wasn't trying hard enough.

- As told to Ingrid Tharasook [TOP](#) [TOP](#)

Find this article at:

<http://money.cnn.com/2008/04/01/smbusiness/dyslexia.fsb/index.htm?postversion=2008040210>