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CRAIG HARTLEY/HB

#### **COMPANY: THE SELF-EXPRESSION CENTER**

OWNER: Sandra Zimmer  
YEAR FOUNDED: 1992  
2002 REVENUE: \$160,000  
2003 REVENUE: \$160,000  
EMPLOYEES: 4 (CONTRACT)  
WEB SITES: [www.self-expression.com](http://www.self-expression.com),  
[www.transformstagefright.com](http://www.transformstagefright.com)

Sandra Zimmer of the Self-Expression Center: 'People say it can't be taught. But these are skills that can be learned.'

## Speaking up

The Self-Expression Center has helped many business people get their points across without being upstaged by fear

**BY DEBRA BEACHY**  
SPECIAL TO HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Helping people conquer stage fright is more than just a mission for Sandra Zimmer. She has made it her business.

Clients have come from as far away as Ohio to take courses on making effective public presentations at Zimmer's Houston

company, the Self-Expression Center. They include trial attorneys, corporate executives, doctors, teachers, ministers and aspiring actors — and none of them mind paying for a chance to shine more in the limelight.

Courses vary in price from individual coaching at \$200 an hour, to an eight-hour project at \$1,200, to a weekend course at

\$495. The courses, with a maximum of 14 people, have titles such as Leadership Presence, Acting for Non-Actors and Acting for Teens. The company also offers telecoaching and corporate training.

Despite cutbacks in corporate spending, the Self-Expression Center took in \$160,000 in revenue last year, the same take as in 2002.

## EXPRESSION: Public speaking coach gives presenters something to talk about

“People say it can’t be taught,” says Zimmer. “But these are skills that can be learned. Effective public speaking can be taught. Traditional public speaking focuses on the mechanics, from the outside in. Our work starts on the inside, getting people comfortable.”

Zimmer says that she and other instructors at the center teach clients to relax “on the inside” when they are seeking to hold the attention of a group.

Many of Zimmer’s clients tend to be introverts and therefore feel uncomfortable speaking in front of a group.

Ironically, she says, people with the most fear of public speaking often tend to become the most effective public speakers. After taking courses, Zimmer says, clients learn how to manage tension and to enjoy being the center of attention.

The Self-Expression Center uses relaxation techniques that involve dealing with and transferring tension in the body when people are the center of attention.

Sharon Jackson, a graphic-design business owner who has taken courses at the Self-Expression Center, says the classes helped her overcome discomfort in speaking in front of a group.

As a business owner, and in her role on the board of a nonprofit organization, Jackson finds herself speaking in front of groups on a regular basis.

Shortly after taking the courses, Jackson had to address a group of 30 people. She found that by utilizing the techniques she learned, she could connect with the audience “being natural and authentic. I was much more comfortable,” she says.

Another client, the Houston-based engineering firm of Walter P. Moore, hired Zimmer to help its engineers hone presentation skills with clients.

“We enjoyed her approach; bringing out what folks have and just letting them get comfortable in their own skins,” says Walter P. Moore director of training Leigh Mires, who says the firm selected Zimmer after looking at several presentation consultants. “There was no methodology; the focus was on being authentic. I think the engineers were pleased and fascinated.”

Zimmer conducted a two-day foundation course for Walter P. Moore and also presents

monthly seminars to the company on a selected topic, such as how to handle question and answer sessions during a presentation.

“Every week we videotape (engineers’ presentations), and they just get better and better,” Mires says.

### GROUP DYNAMICS

Zimmer, who holds a bachelor’s degree in psychology and a master’s degree in theater, says she realized the potential for her business when she watched drama students battle stage fright in a University of Houston extension course she taught.

“I noticed that acting students got very tense in front of a group, and I began to develop a system for presentation and public speaking, turning the tension from stage fright into speaking from the heart,” Zimmer says. “I began to develop acting for non-actors, and in the process, I saw it had real value in the real world.”

When Zimmer began teaching acting at the UH extension program, she incorporated techniques to deal with stage fright for her students.

“I found I was very good at teaching,” she says.

Zimmer was successful enough at teaching that she shifted her work from doing commercials to offering courses to teach other people how to act. At first, Zimmer advertised the courses in community newspapers, teaching at UH, the Country Playhouse, and in her own home.

In 1992, Zimmer says she “took a leap of faith” and started her company, leasing office space on the west side of Houston with \$10,000 she had inherited from her grandmother.

“I didn’t know if I’d be able to pay the rent,” Zimmer says. “I’ve paid the rent for the last 12 years.”

Zimmer started the Self-Expression Center with herself as the sole employee. The company now has two contract employees to handle the office and execute marketing, and two teachers trained by Zimmer.

The entrepreneur continues to spread the word about her company through ads, by networking with business and trade groups,



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**Sandra Zimmer**  
The Self-Expression Center

and through the Internet. Recently, Zimmer even co-hosted the Women’s Business Show on KRTS Radio 92.1 FM.

But the Internet, says Zimmer, “is the best marketing tool.”

“It’s miraculous,” she says. “People start searching for something, and there I am.”

Nonetheless, Zimmer says marketing is her biggest challenge.

As for the future, Zimmer sees lots of potential for her company to grow. She would like to see it expand, perhaps as a franchise. So she has hired a firm that is helping her develop a strategic objective and structure the business.

“I’ve thought about franchising because I’ve created two amazing programs and would like to train more people to teach, so it can be taught all across the country,” Zimmer says.

**DEBRA BEACHY** is a Houston-based freelance writer.