

Presentation survival skills guide

By Jennifer MacKay

Public speaking is daunting at best, completely terrifying at worst, but to succeed in business you need to master the art of giving an effective presentation.

Like it or not we are judged on how well we present. A good presentation gets you noticed, raises your profile and afterwards makes you feel fantastic. A poor presentation is quickly forgotten, along with the presenter.

Presentation skills are just that, a skill like any other. With a little bit of know-how and some dedicated practice everyone can shine at giving presentations. When we look at all the

benefits of being a good presenter, it is well worth the extra effort.

Here we focus on seven steps to help you unlock your presentation prowess.

STEP ONE: What is the purpose of your presentation?

Resist the temptation to start writing immediately and instead ask yourself: 'What is the point of my presentation?' A

lot of time and heartache can be saved by getting clear about the objective. To do this, review the brief and ask yourself:

- What topic am I presenting?
- What is the purpose of the talk? (To present research, pitch an idea, ask for money, etc.)
- What is my key message? (What is my main theme?)
- What is my aim? (What do I want to achieve?)
- How much time do I have?



STEP TWO: Who is your audience?

While you may be the one presenting, presenting really isn't about you; it's about the audience. Your second step is to think about your audience and what they need from you.

Ask yourself:

- Who is attending my presentation? (How many people, names, job titles, why they are coming, and who has decision-making power?)
- What do they already know about the topic? (Are they experts or lay-people?)
- What are their expectations? (Are they expecting PowerPoint, handouts etc?)
- What do they need to know, or do, as a result of my presentation?

STEP THREE: Select the content

After you've established your purpose, selecting your content becomes straightforward.

One approach is to list the points that you'd like to include in your presentation. Let's imagine you are giving a presentation about vegetarianism and that your purpose is to persuade your audience to become vegetarian. Therefore you might want to include information on what vegetarians eat; why being a vegetarian is good for your health; what makes vegetarianism good for the planet; and maybe something about some famous vegetarians.

After you've got your ideas, choose the strongest, using the 'point, proof, comment' method to test them out. Go through each idea and ask yourself:

- **What is the point?** For example, 'a vegetarian diet is good for your health'.
- **What is my proof?** Back up your point with a fact/story. For example, 'research shows that vegetarians are 40% less likely to develop high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease'.
- **What is the comment?** (My opinion or observation). For example: 'Based on the research, I believe that a vegetarian lifestyle offers greater



protection against debilitating diseases'.

If you can't answer these three questions, don't include the point.

Bringing the content to life

Facts, figures, stories and visuals all help to bring a presentation to life. People respond to different approaches, so you may want to have a little of each in your presentation.

Less is more

Sometimes we want to include everything in our presentation. It is usually the case that fewer points, well explained, will end up being more effective.

STEP FOUR: Managing your materials

Materials are there to support you, not the other way round. Less is always more and simple can be sensational. Here's how:

PowerPoint

- Design: use simple fonts (maximum two fonts) and consistent colours (maximum four colours).
- One slide per main point (five lines maximum).
- Use visuals rather than words, where possible, to get your message across.

Handouts

- Number handouts clearly and use headings so people can find the

- section they need to follow your talk.
- Be consistent with font and design.
- Consider giving them out at the end, otherwise people read them during your presentation.
- Save a tree – make handouts available electronically.

And remember:

- Talk to the audience, not to your slides.
- Reading your slides or handouts screams: 'I'm not prepared.'
- Check spelling and grammar. Mistakes appear even bigger up on that large screen.

STEP FIVE: Structuring your presentation

Choose a structure that logically presents your content. Here are three ideas:

1. Past – Present – Future

This timeline approach makes your points easy to remember. For the example, imagine you are presenting a business idea.

Past: Begin with what or who initially sparked your business idea (something from childhood; a trip that you took; a cause you got involved with etc.).

Present: What does your organisation do? What is its purpose? What does it produce or support? What are its achievements?

Future: What are your plans for the future? What do you want? How can the audience help you?

2. Persuasive structure for persuasive presentations.

Beginning:

Hook: start with a quote, joke, story, rhetorical question, etc.

Main message: tell the audience what your presentation is about, the position you will be taking on it and the three points you are going to cover.

Middle:

Your three points: for each example include your point, proof and comment. You may want to put your strongest point

first, your weakest point second, and end with your second strongest point.

End:

Summarise your three points and end with a question, or by challenging your audience to do something.

3. For and against

Show both sides of the argument before putting forth your preferred choice.

- Start by outlining the idea.
- Provide reasons in favour of the idea.
- Provide reasons against the idea.
- Outline what you think should happen.

STEP SIX: Delivery skills

Your listeners want to hear information. They also want to see your personality. This brings us to your secret weapon... you. Get ready to enhance your strengths.

Eye contact:

Forget everything you've been told about looking above people's heads or staring at their eyebrows. The only way to make a connection with your audience is to look them in the eye. Try:

- Scanning the room with a 'z' formation.
- Dividing the room into four sections, and hit each section.
- Make extended eye contact with people around the room.

Voice: the 5Ps

- **Projection:** speak so everyone can hear you.
- **Pitch:** use the 'melody' of your voice. Deeper tones show seriousness and higher tones show enthusiasm. Match your pitch to your message.
- **Pace:** too fast and you lose people; too slow and people lose interest. Keep a steady pace, and then add variety by slowing down or speeding up at appropriate times.
- **Pronunciation:** enunciating your words helps your audience understand you; it also helps you to slow down. Remember an accent can make your memorable, so make yours an advantage. When presenting to people who are unfamiliar with your

accent, ensure that you pay extra attention to your pronunciation and speed.

■ **Pause:** the pause is probably your most powerful voice tool. Pausing gives your audience the chance to reflect on what you have said and it gives you a chance to breathe. It is also a fantastic substitute for words like 'um', 'err', 'like', 'basically'. Saying nothing says you are in control.

Body language: Gestures show your personality. Some presenters like to be still, while others have got to move. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way, but there are some general tips.

Do:

- Get 'centred' before you move.
- Steeple (bring your hands together with just the finger tips touching).
- Count on your fingers to demonstrate points.
- Make the size of the gestures match the room. (For example, aim for smaller-sized gestures for a small audience and go for bolder and large gestures for bigger spaces and more people).
- Move, but then make sure you stop before speaking.

Don't:

- Put your hands in pockets or touch your face.
- Make 'windmill' gestures with your arms.
- Rock, shuffle or pace aimlessly.

A word about practice. Many people are happy to 'wing it' and give their presentation without having practised it. Great sportspeople and musicians don't get great by winging it. A lot is riding on your presentation, so give it the practice it deserves.

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STEP SEVEN: Handling questions and answers

A Q&A gives the speaker a chance to interact with our audience, so prepare for it. Make a list of the questions you think you may get asked. Then write answers for each of them.

Some top tips:

- Have people raise their hand to ask a question.
- Thank them for their question.
- Repeat the question to ensure that you and others understand it. This also buys you time to think of a response.
- Keep your answer simple and link it back to the key message of your presentation.
- If you don't know the answer, offer to find out. Never make it up.
- After your answer, ask 'does that answer your question?' Clarify if need be.
- If there are no questions, introduce one by saying 'a question I'm often asked is...'
- Show interest and ask them some questions too.

Common worries and potential disasters.

Presenting to people who know little

about your topic

Focus on what they need to know. Avoid jargon, use clear examples and remember that stories are a great way to illustrate your point to lay-people. Be extra sure that your structure is clear.

Presenting to people who know a lot about your topic

Stay calm. Even experts like to be reminded of things. It can be refreshing to hear someone else's perspective. Experts will spot mistakes, so double check your information and materials. Make sure your presentation is polished; a confident delivery will show that you know your stuff.

Make a checklist

Make sure you include these points on yours:

- Materials
- Presentation
- Answers to Q&A
- PowerPoint slides and handouts
- Memory stick
- Computer
- Marker pens
- Business cards.

Technology

Check technological compatibility in advance. Book the room, flip chart, projector etc.

Room and directions

- Where is the room?
- How do you want it set up?
- Where is the venue?
- How will you get there?
- How long will it take you to get there?
- Who is your contact and what are their contact details?

Date and time

- What is the date and time of your talk?
- Can you access the room ahead of time to set up?
- How long do you have for your presentation?

Technological problems

Your PowerPoint won't work. At some stage, technology will fail you. Always be ready to do your presentation without any support. This is the sign of a primed presenter.

What if I forget what I want to say?

The 'brainfreeze' is probably the number one fear when presenting. It can be helpful to remember that the audience doesn't know what you are going to say. If you forget a bit or get it in the wrong order, don't let that throw you. If you get stumped, repeating the last thing you have said, asking the audience a question or providing an example of what you have been talking about, can all help to get the brain to remember.

Final words

After your presentation, take a few minutes to reflect on how it went. Ask yourself what you did well and what you could improve on next time. With know-how and practice, these seven steps will help you to present your information and yourself in the best light. And who knows you may even start to look forward to giving your next presentation. ☺

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