

The art of effective presentations and speeches

Plus: take the persuasive presentations quiz

By Karen Berg

You've been asked to give a speech or presentation. Your first reaction is excitement: "My time has come; I'm gonna knock 'em dead." Your second reaction is concern: "What have I gotten myself into?" And then panic: "How can I get out of this?"

In today's business environment, people at all levels in all types of companies are called upon to make formal, informal and impromptu presentations. And both personal and professional successes are dependent upon effective communications.

Many of us, of course, want to improve or perfect our presentation skills. This is evident in the thousands of books and articles detailing rules and processes for creating and delivering effective presentations. A quick Internet search for "how to give a speech" yields 8.9 million results with an additional 2.9 million results for "how to give a presentation." So let's focus on four salient issues with which all of us could use a little help.

Strategy

The more you put yourself into your presentation, the closer it is to your heart, the more your audience will be affected. Distance from your ideas minimizes the impact of your presentation.

Follow Mark Twain's recommendation that "a good impromptu speech takes

about three weeks to prepare." Begin by identifying your touchstones (exactly what you need to accomplish), then create a technique around what you want your audience to do or feel with texture (words and visuals) that will impact your audience; then test each statement against touchstones.

Structure

You're doing this to sell, entertain, inform, defend, rally around an issue or communicate a call to action. So start with a statement of the call to action, which seems counterintuitive; most of us want to save this for the big closing, but arguments are secondary in communications.

The first priority is to be clear about your proposal with facts that support the conclusion (which usually won't be remembered). This way, your audience can easily judge how well the facts validate the conclusion.

Overall, your presentation should have three sections: a compelling beginning that will seize the attention of the audience; a middle that uses support points to keep your audience on track; and a closing that draws together all your points, doesn't meander and reiterates the call to action.

Competition

The minds of the people in your audience are crowded; they're often thinking about their own jobs, kids, relation-

ships, financial stability, health, mortgages, cars or, perhaps, their own turn at the front of the room. Because listeners follow one of two roads — with the speaker or ruminating over personal issues — your road should say excitement rather than detour.

Keep your audience engaged through energy and enthusiasm; demonstrate a command of the subject with wit and a practiced skill with words. Use gestures and pregnant pauses, grabbers, anecdotes, rhetorical questions, one-word leads, thematic phrases, powerful statements or dates, even shocking statistics that are tailored to the audience and the topic at hand. Make visuals work for you, but avoid turning your back on your audience. Doing so will give them time to detour.

Confidence

Stage fright is nothing more than a lack of confidence built upon a few bad experiences and unrealized fears that stream into our conscious and subconscious thoughts. The good news: It lasts only a few minutes and is worst the moments just before you start to speak.

Getting over stage fright is as simple as this equation: Positive experiences plus a focus on things you can control plus deep breaths equals confidence.

Experience is the best learning tool, so volunteer for opportunities to speak that will be positive. Start with small teams, move up to groups, take on a full

room and then it's on to the dais in front of an auditorium full of strangers.

Control comes from preparation so you aren't caught off-guard. Know your topic, content, audience and the room. Prepare, rehearse, fine-tune and anticipate questions. Gain control from the start by not looking at notes during your opening statements.

Taking deep breaths allows oxygen to flow, calms nerves and lowers the pitch of your voice so you'll present a well-articulated presentation delivered with conviction, poise and confidence.

And success is all about confidence. The art of an effective presentation is the fine balance of developing, organizing and delivering verbal presentations — understanding what an audience wants to know, crafting the right messages and delivering an engaging performance. It means rehearsing and being prepared to adeptly handle negative questions and convey information for the desired outcome. And it often means getting outside help so you can make the most of your time in front of the room. **T**



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Test your knowledge about the rules and processes of developing persuasive presentations

1. An effective presentation always answers the following question:

- a) So what?
- b) Who cares?
- c) What's in it for me?
- d) All of the above.

2. What are the three elements to a memorable message:

- a) An unforgettable catch phrase, facts, clarity
- b) Simplicity, clarity, veracity
- c) The bottom line, facts and anecdotal information
- d) A memorable presenter, an unforgettable catch phrase and one good joke

3. What will the audience actually remember about your presentation:

- a) 55 percent remembers how you look
- b) 38 percent remembers how you sound
- c) 7 percent remembers the content of your presentation
- d) All of the above

4. What is the purpose of visuals in a presentation?

- a) To distract the audience from fixating on your appearance
- b) Reinforce your notes
- c) Eye candy to keep the audience focused
- d) To graphically represent the information you're presenting

5. At the end of the presentation, make sure you:

- a) Thank the audience for their time
- b) Summarize the two or three points you want the audience to remember
- c) Offer some sort of giveaway so no one walks away empty-handed
- d) Leave time for Q-and-A

6. True or False? You are as important as the message.

7. The ultimate bottom line in winning over your audience is:

- a) Credibility
- b) Simplicity
- c) Proof
- d) Personal charm

8. Which of these statements is true of the art of persuasion?

- a) They will not buy what they don't understand
- b) Trust is hard to win, easy to lose and sometimes impossible to rebuild
- c) Don't waste words; be efficient
- d) All of the above

Answers

1D: All of the above. An effective presentation always answers the most basic needs of your audience: So what? Who cares? What's in it for me? Anything in your presentation that doesn't

answer these questions should probably get dropped.

2C: Bottom line, facts and anecdotal information. These are the three key elements to a memorable message and include case histories that support the bottom line so the audience knows why they should care about this information.

3D: All of the above. One week after a presentation, the audience will remember only about 10 percent of what went on there. And of that 10 percent: 55 percent of what they retain is how you looked, 38 percent is how you sounded and a mere 7 percent of their memory retention goes to the actual content of the presentation. So make it count.

4D: To graphically represent the information you're presenting. The purpose of visuals in a presentation should be graphic representations of the information, not your notes. Set up the visual so that the audience anticipates what is coming. When the visual comes up, pause. Let the audience see what is up there and orient themselves to the information provided.

5B: Summarize the two or three points you want the audience to remember. At the end of the presentation, make sure you keep your eyes on the prize, by driving home your message — and the best way to do that is to effectively summarize the two or three points you really want

the audience to remember.

6. True: If they don't like or trust you, it's unlikely they will support you regardless of how good your idea is.

7C: Proof. The ultimate bottom line in winning over your audience must be demonstrated success. Let's face it: Too many ideas sound good on paper, but don't pan out. A good idea is supported by more than theory; it has concrete, positive examples that are essential to gaining commitment and support.

8D: All of the above. The art of persuasion is built upon all of these statements.
A. They will not buy what they don't understand: It is not only essential to be clear, but you must determine whether your audience understands and accepts what you are saying.
B. Trust is hard to win, easy to lose and sometimes impossible to rebuild: Consistency may build relationships, but overconfidence destroys them.
C. Don't waste words. Be efficient: The longer and more detailed the message, the easier it is for your audience to get lost. You can measure the value of what you are saying by determining whether you are answering your audience's questions: So what? Who cares? What's in it for me?

— K.B.

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