

A PRESENTATION IS A CHANCE TO INFORM, IMPRESS AND GET THINGS DONE AND HAS BEEN CALLED THE BUSINESS EQUIVALENT OF AN 'OPEN GOAL' – BUT TRYING TO WING IT IS FRAUGHT WITH DANGER. PATRICK FORSYTH INVESTIGATES.

Presentation

Consider speaking: we all have chats, swap gossip or say, "What time do you call this?" to the postman, but sometimes we may have to do something rather more formal. However, if you ask many people to stand up and address an audience they go to pieces.

But anyone can make an acceptable, workman-like presentation. Many even find it is something at which they can excel if they go about it correctly. Few people are natural presenters; those who make it look easy tend to do so because they work at it.

Stand up totally unprepared and things can go very wrong. People stumble, they hesitate, and they sweat. They begin every other sentence with the superfluous word 'basically'. Commenting on a project, they say "Um, er ... at this moment in time we are making considerable progress with the necessary preliminary work prior to the establishment of the initial first phase" when all they mean is "We aim to start soon".

Just when they should be impressing their audience with expertise, making them interested and confident in what is being said, they upset or confuse them. Exactly what is said

and how it is put matters – indeed, there may be a great deal hanging on it.

At worst, people go on too long, their explanation explains nothing and where they are going is wholly unclear. Some fidget endlessly, others remain stock still, gripping the lectern in front of them until their knuckles go white. Still others are apt to pick holes in the

audience, or their noses. If they use slides, some people only provide ones that can be read from the front of the room with a telescope, something made worse by their asking brightly, "Can you see all right at the back?", despite the fact that there is precious little they can do about it if the answer is 'no', and in any case they should not be asking – they should know if their slides are legible!

Other presenters barely pause for breath, rushing from one inappropriate or overlong sentence to the next. Indeed, the only long word of which some speakers appear ignorant is 'rehearsal'.

THE OTHER TYPE

Of course, a lucky few believe that making a presentation is second nature. They can wing it. They are convinced that they know their stuff and how to put it over. Their first rule is to assume that the audience is ignorant, convinced it is in the presence of a master provided the optimum level of impenetrable gobbledegook is achieved. They talk very slowly, speaking more loudly as they do so.

For this kind of speaker, a presentation is something to savour. They need only the briefest of introductions and they are away, moving quickly past the first slide without noticing that it is upside down and the audience is about to walk out. It makes us lesser mortals feel sadly inadequate. Even the great Mark Twain was reported to have said, "It normally takes me three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech".

PREPARATION IS KEY

That said, what makes it work? Preparation is key. It ensures something worthwhile is delivered to the audience, and knowing you are prepared is the greatest boost to confidence you can get.

First, think about what you need to say, and what you should not say. Comprehensiveness is never an option and often time pressure makes encapsulation essential. Think about the order in which you will say things. Make sure it is in a logical sequence (and plan to explain your choice). You will need to get off to a good start, so the first few moments need particular thought – they make your audience want to hear more, and give you confidence that it's going well. Limit the number of main points and make each one a mini-presentation with its own beginning, middle and end and with a manageable number of subsidiary points under each topic. Allow time to exemplify and illustrate as well as to describe. Effectively give yourself a clear agenda from which to work.

Only after you have a clear plan, give thought to how you will put things over. Trying to write a presentation, thinking simultaneously of what to say and how to say it is always more complicated. Think particularly of how you can achieve the following:

> **Clarity:** never underestimate either the difficulty of achieving clarity, or the impressiveness that comes when

I am gentle by nature, not stormy,
But a dam inside of me broke,
When the man who was
speaking before me,
Wound up with my opening joke
– Dennis Norden,
British humorist



ons:

stand-up comedy or serious communication?

something expected to be complicated is surprisingly well explained. How often do I hear people saying things like 'we are flexible in our approach'. Maybe, but what exactly does it mean? You know what makes your business special, take time to work out a way of making others clear about it too.

> **Description:** similarly, make sure that you are genuinely descriptive. Saying something is 'sort of slippery' is descriptive but imprecise; saying it is 'as slippery as a freshly buttered ice-rink' not only says more, it is much more likely to be remembered.

Also, make notes from which to speak. Never write the presentation and plan to read it, that is both difficult and likely to sound stilted. Set out the main points, add a note of subsidiary ones, note key things in full perhaps (figures, a quotation or definition) and go over it until you are sufficiently familiar with it to speak from that. Mark the emphasis (use symbols – '!' – write 'Pause'). Time it. Given half an hour, it projects great confidence to stand up knowing that it will take the right amount of time.

There is more, of course. You may want to use slides (not too much information on each). If so, make sure that you are familiar with the equipment and that it works. Having everything organised, knowing that you can read your notes, finish on time and not trip over the wire to the projector all help quell nerves. Being able to maximise the opportunity may demand some study and certainly some preparation; but the effort is worthwhile.

Finally, sometimes you need a lighter touch. Be careful. It can work well, but the moment you say something like "Here's a funny thing", it had better be funny. Quips, quotes and anecdotes can, however, work well, especially if they fit neatly with what you are saying and assist explanation rather than just being an aside.

With some thought and good preparation you can make a real impression. Take a sip of water, a few deep breaths, and begin – "Ladies and Gentlemen..." ■

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