

The Savvy Communicator:

Three Ways to Connect Your Information to Their Reality

By Kevin E. O'Connor

In this article...

Examine three strategies to improve not only your presentation skills but also your communication abilities with your colleagues, staff, pharmaceutical representatives, vendors and patients.

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Picture yourself seated in a conference room waiting for a speaker's presentation. After a few cursory remarks, the expert with the amazing resume fires up the PowerPoint presentation and proceeds to dump important data on you for the next hour and a half.

The result? Half of the audience disappears after lunch, and the other half sits politely creating unrelated task lists in their heads or discreetly checking their Blackberrys.

Perhaps the speaker didn't understand the potential downfalls of old-fashioned lecturing. Maybe he didn't realize how using questions throughout a presentation is a smart way to engage the audience. Most importantly, he certainly forgot to focus the material on how it related to his audience and not to his own skill sets.

Beware of becoming this speaker. As a physician executive, it is vital to recognize the importance of communicating through a presentation in two key ways—from you to others and also from others to you.

Whether you share information with an audience of one, ten or a thousand, the way you connect with and relate to the people listening makes all the difference in how you are perceived, your influence and ultimately, your success.

Avoid the data dump

In my coaching work with people in the medical and pharmaceutical industry, I've discovered that the struggle in teaching people who present is in redirecting their robust and all-consuming interest in data.

We've all been there—overwhelmed by the data—wondering about the relevance of endless charts and graphs to our daily work. Once at a very boring presentation, a physician turned to me with a straight face and said, “Well I'm a doctor; I've been trained to appear interested!”

The famed travel guru, Arthur Frommer, once recommended how to pack for a trip to Europe. He suggested that before we pull out our suitcase, we place everything we want to pack on our bed. Then he recommended we get rid of half of those items. Then remove the remaining half.

Now, he went on, we are ready for the suitcase...or by that time, the backpack! He understood how clutter happened. And he knew that by ruthlessly editing his list of clothes, he'd have more fun and less to carry.


While many of us complain about others who present tons of data and words on their PowerPoint slides, I still find a few (a very few) people who recognize that PowerPoint merely supports the speaker; it does not compete or replace the speaker.

One of the main problems is that many of us “build our presentation” by going to PowerPoint first. This is a mistake since we wind up putting everything we want to say on the slides. Rather than being a PowerPoint presentation, this deck becomes a PowerPoint complete set of notes. No wonder we then feel compelled to read every slide.

Here is a quick and effective alternative: Begin with your top three take-away points, your critical and essential message. What is it you want your audience to leave with, feel and remember after your presentation?

Write these down on paper before you ever open your PowerPoint application. Then, when you are ready to make your slides, keep this note of your three take away points and the critical essential message close at hand.

When you complete your slide deck, go back and cut half of the words, then go back again and cut another half. Make each slide dependent upon you to teach it and interpret it for the audience.



The first job of the presenter, communicator or teacher is to engage. When you can help your listeners feel included and connected from the beginning, you have set the foundation for a successful presentation.

Remember, they came to hear you, not to look at your slides and listen as you read them. They came to remember you and your essential message.

Interpreting data

Attendees at conferences never come for the data only. Neither do your patients, staff or colleagues in meetings. People want an “interpretation” of the data, and they want your interpretation of the data. This is what they feel is wisdom. This is also called the “story” behind the data.

Consider gardeners. The fact that a seed germinates in a certain way is data; how it is unique to this plant and

what that means to your gardening is the story. The final blooming season is the take-away.

For medical presentations, simply mentioning “the patient” is a big part of the story that is frequently missed by medical speakers—both the formal presenters who speak in hotel conference ballrooms and the informal presentations given by you or your colleagues at smaller staff meetings in the workplace.

Begin with the patient. This sets the context for the listener.

Once I attended a lecture on mucositis. The physician from Loyola in Chicago began by saying, “A loco-

motive charging down my throat; hot lava pouring down my esophagus; a wall of flame within me; acid eating me every moment ... this is what my patients tell me they feel. Our work today will help them. Let’s get started.”

Did he have engagement from his listeners at that moment? You bet!

Here’s how you keep your listener engaged:

- Keep research in perspective
- Examine the trends
- Always refer to the big picture

The main reason you are presenting information is for the story.

These strategies will keep you connected to the story behind the numbers. This continuity brings the listeners “online” with you and helps them link data together in a way that makes sense but more importantly, that matters to them and their work.

Summarize frequently even with the most experienced of audiences. Take nothing for granted. The main reason you are presenting information is for the story—they can easily obtain the data from the latest journals or medical blogs.

What you want to do is relate the data to their reality. Share pertinent stories, and don’t forget to ask your listeners for their stories as well. Remember, no audience came merely to review your slides, they came for you.

Focus on them

The first job of the presenter, communicator or teacher is to engage. When you can help your listeners feel included and connected from the beginning, you have set the foundation for a successful presentation. This is actually the hallmark of adult learning.

When your clients or attendees both know one another and feel something in common with them and with you, they will give you their full attention. If they do not feel that connection, it is less likely you will have what you need to explain or teach and they won’t have what they need to learn well.

This focused approach also encourages us as presenters and teachers to take on an “inside-out” perspective. The word education is derived from the Latin “educare” which literally means “to draw forth from”...it does not mean to “dump into.”

Yet consider how many presenters make the error of racing through PowerPoint slides. The secret of being

an effective communicator is to focus on the other: the attendee, the colleague, the patient. Then when you focus on the material that relates to them and explain its ramifications to their reality, the learning package is wrapped up neatly, and you have modeled your expertise and enthusiasm for them first and for your topic second.

Try another strategy to convey information: use questions. Questions help organize. Avoid always playing the expert—even if you are one. When a listener asks a question, throw the question back to the group and see what they do with it. Enjoy the process of discovery rather than shutting all discussion down by giving your answer.

Of course you will answer many questions routinely. But those important ones that are interesting, controversial, personal and challenging—those are the ones where listeners can learn by thinking rather than by taking notes from you.

You can shake up the question process as well. Rather than simply posing a question to the whole group with the hope that someone somewhere knows the answer, put them in pairs or groups of three (never more than four in a group) and have them discuss the question and volunteer their answers.

Your listeners learn from each other as much and sometimes more than they learn from us. You know this to be true. Physicians generally trust a fellow doctor more than the expert, even if the expert is right on target. Harness that trust, and use the group to help teach each other.

Also, use the power of summary. When you summarize, you help the listener continually reorganize. Never miss another opportunity to summarize, or better yet, ask your listeners to summarize.

Use that small group approach if it improves the discussion dynamic. Don’t forget the successful facilitator’s secret weapon: the flipchart. It has no electricity, no batteries, no software, and it is ready for you at a moment’s notice. The flipchart offers a critical added benefit for your audience and for you: they understand you are “with” them on a moment’s notice too, not just racing through your slides.

Go with substance first

This may not be diet friendly, but always start with the “meat” first. Focus your thoughts and your first words on something that is of high value to the learner regarding that particular day’s information. Don’t apologize for being late, don’t introduce yourself, don’t joke around...just move right to the meat early and simply.

Here’s an example of how to do this:

“Some people think the results of this clinical research are challenging, and they are right. Some think this will impact us dramatically, and they too are absolutely right. Some even feel that for those two excellent reasons we cannot successfully go forward—and I feel that approach is dead wrong! You’ve been chosen because of your expertise and your ability, and I believe that after our time together you will be able to do what is both difficult and challenging because we have brainstormed solutions together. Let’s get started.”

Now that they have listened to the meat at the opening, everyone has a goal. They know the presenter’s passion; they have established in their minds how that passion will relate to their work, and they have some meat to chew on!

This is far more effective than a beginning that takes too long, has nothing to do with why people are there or dawdles around waiting for latecomers. Begin with meat for every meeting, seminar or update.

From a practical standpoint, consider the PowerPoint presentation. To put the meat out there first, we call this technique “last slide first.” Rather than presenting bits of data that lead to a conclusion after an hour, begin with the conclusion and then go back and show how you got there. You’ll show that conclusion slide twice, as the first slide and as your last one. Last slide first!

Or try this approach. Give the meat and conclude that portion with “Let’s get started. Now at my signal I want all of you in groups of three but not with anyone you are currently sitting next to...ready? Go!”

Then ask them to share their greatest challenge with a particular clinical trial. Or ask them to comment on what they have noticed has improved or changed since the last update (a very good question which always elicits a positive response rather than “how’s it going?” to which all will complain!).

After a few minutes, ask what they learned (not what they said) from their group. With that opening, you have engaged them, and they have the beginnings of organizing for themselves what and how they will learn from you.

Offer a different perspective

A while back, I took a flight from Dublin, Ireland, to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. A screen at each seat offered movies and also featured a live camera aimed with the pilot’s view forward. The camera offered an exciting perspective on takeoff and a more restful view as we passed through clouds. It gave a totally different vantage point.

Then I discovered one more option. They also had a camera on the underbelly of the plane where you could see a live shot straight down! This was quite another view.

Give your listeners the same options and more.

Review material at every opportunity so you can weave a tapestry of understanding with the group. You can do this verbally or on a flipchart or chalkboard. Move around the space when you do this, walk close to your listeners, look them in the eye, smile and show your interest especially in review material. This is a time when many presenters grow less enthusiastic because this part feels like “old” material. Not so. It is foundational material.

Work to be useful, not perfect, as you communicate with others. When we focus on everything being “just right” or “perfect,” then we focus too heavily on ourselves. The presenter who contemplates “how can this be useful” is far closer to the listener than the speaker who worries only about himself.

Yes, the data need to be accurate; we need to be seen as knowledgeable, using methods based on sound science. But to be effective at communicating important information to others, we must be relevant, helpful and useful.

Your listeners will thank you.



Kevin E. O’Connor CSP

ACPE, Loyola University
and Columbia College
faculty, Chicago, Ill.

kevin@kevinoc.com



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