

Want to win over an audience? How to improve your presentation skills

Whether the prospect of delivering a presentation fills you with excitement or dread, there are key steps to ensuring you make an impact.

Presentations shouldn't be just a set of bullet points on a screen. In *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore used presentation slides to provide a compelling argument to his audience. Your next business presentation may not win any awards, but there are things you can do to make an impact.

Remember, it's not about you

There are many reasons why you would need to give a presentation: pitching for funding, building a business relationship or making a sale. However, the overall purpose of your presentation should always do one thing: provide something your audience needs. In his book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey writes: "Begin with the end in mind". Think about what you want the audience to do as a result of hearing your talk – whether it is to buy your product the next day or introduce you to their company's senior decision-makers.

Structure it first

Before you do anything, you need to consider the structure of your presentation. If you're selling a product or service, then you can start by describing a problem faced by the client, industry or market. Then describe how your product or service solves that need. If you're providing an update on a project, consider a timeline of events. Whatever you

choose, you should lay out the key points that help your audience understand the message, then gather supporting material. Supporting material includes facts, statistics, relevant quotations, client testimonials and, above all, stories. Stories create the emotional connection that makes your presentation memorable.

You will need to grab the audience's attention within the first 30 seconds, so prepare a bold opening such as "I'm going to show you how to increase sales by 20%".

Make a storyboard

I like to describe each slide or deck on a sticky note in a sentence or drawing (you may prefer to use some software). For example, "chart showing that sales volume has increased by 20%" or "picture of a child playing with one of our toys". Then arrange them in a logical order. Communications expert Nancy Duarte said that presentations fail because of too much information, not too little. For each slide, ask yourself the question, does it help this audience understand this message? If you're not sure, put it aside for use in a different presentation. By the time you're finished you'll have a logical outline of your talk.

Avoid death by bullet point

Images have much greater impact than text, so avoid death by bullet point by looking for images that support your points and stories. You can find plenty of free-to-use photos online through Creative Commons, an organisation which releases copyright-licenses free of charge to the public, and there are low-cost photo libraries available too. Best of all would be to use your own photos. Remember that you and your

message are unique, so avoid bland, generic stock photos and clip art. Use text sparingly and make sure you use a large, clear font. You should use a consistent colour scheme that matches your brand image.

You may love your logo, but it doesn't need to appear on every single slide. If you're 20 minutes into a presentation and the audience doesn't know who you are, then a logo on each slide won't help. Put it at the beginning and the end, along with your contact information.

Practice makes perfect

Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. Feeling confident will allow you to focus on your audience. You should practise with the equipment you'll be using. If you are using someone else's equipment, make sure you're familiar with how it connects and practise so that you'll be able to do it smoothly. If you'll be connecting to a sophisticated set up at a client's office, find out if you can get into the meeting room in advance. Watching a salesperson spend 15 minutes trying to connect their latest iPhone to a prospect's Soviet-era television can be entertaining on a rainy day – but it doesn't help them get their message across.

It's all in the delivery

This is where all your preparation pays off. Take a deep breath. Smile at the audience and give your presentation, with impact.

Steve Champion is a member of Toastmasters International

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