

How to Deliver Effective Presentations

Effective communicators plan their presentations and hone their skills at every turn.

By Trevor Summerson



Communicating your message effectively so that others listen, understand, and act is a key leadership skill. Part of that communications strategy often includes public speaking—speaking to the media, to the community, and at professional development events.

Public speaking is a set of skills, not a talent. A great presentation does not just happen. It is planned, rehearsed, and then delivered well. You can be a good presenter if you learn the skills.

The Importance of Research

The actual presentation is the tip of the iceberg; the real work is the preparation and research. Indeed, good

preparation provides you with sound, robust knowledge about the presentation topic and in doing so, generates confidence.

Ensure that your facts are straight; spend time collecting and confirming your information. Research your topic to find new insights, but make sure that you can back up your information with clear evidence, not hearsay. If you can't support your information, present it as a finding, not as a fact.

Structure and Presentation

Know your audience. Understand your audience. What do they want? Why would they listen to you? If you want your presentation to reach them, you must meet their needs. While you are talking, they are asking themselves, “What’s in it for us?” If you have not addressed the group before, learn as much as you can about them first.

Structure the information effectively. You can present your information in many ways. The key is to choose the most effective method for your audience.

The most boring and ineffectual presentation style is the scientific method: problem statement, followed by a hypothesis, a method, results, and a conclusion. That sounds logical, but most people in business today don't have the patience to listen to that litany. We want the answer first. So when you address a business group, the most effective approach might be to state your conclusions first, followed by supporting information.

Another structure that fits a wide range of audiences is the “tell ’em structure”: tell them what you're going to say, give them the details, and conclude by reviewing what you told them.

Don't memorize. Don't memorize your presentation. Instead, know your topic and the issues, and then make notes for yourself on index cards. Write key words that remind you of your messages. Those cards are much easier to handle than sheets of paper.

Rehearse your presentation. Rehearse your speech at least three times—standing. This step is important because you will be delivering the speech on your feet, so you should get used to how that feels. The best way to reinforce a set of skills is by repeating the pattern the way you plan to deliver it.

Tools and Techniques

Illustrate your main points. A picture can tell a story; images help us understand. A good image to use to illustrate your main points during a presentation is a diagram. Again, think about your audience and determine the appropriate kind of visual. Pie charts, bar graphs, even piles of coins can illustrate and emphasize your points to the audience.

Use case studies. Nothing is more powerful in a presentation than a case study that can support your message. The best case studies are personal, because they are yours. They are easier to remember and they make your presentation unique. When using a case study, however, it's important to share only the essential information. You'll lose your audience if you insist on sharing unnecessary details.

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Use PowerPoint. Your PowerPoint slides should enhance your presentation. Don't make the common mistake of designing your presentation around the slides. Instead, create your presentation first, then decide how to illustrate your points. Don't let the slides be a distraction. As a rule, each slide should have no more than 20 words on it. And don't simply read the slides—that's ineffective.

Know the venue and be prepared. Go into the room before your audience arrives to check the setup and get the feel of the space. This practice will help make it *your* room. Walk around the room and sit in a few different chairs to take in the room's atmosphere and how your audience will see you. Check your equipment and put on your busiest slide to check for readability. Drink one or two glasses of warm water to lubricate your vocal cords and hydrate yourself.

Check last-minute details before you begin speaking. Check the exit doors and paths from the building. If an emergency occurs, the audience will look to you, the speaker, for leadership. Be prepared to tell people how to leave the room and the building. If it becomes necessary, tell them in a calm, commanding, and confident voice. Public speaking carries the responsibility of leadership.

Check in with your contact person. Your contact should be present to introduce you. In addition, he or she should sit near the back of the room to survey the room, to help late arrivals who have questions, to take care of the lights, to distribute handouts, to usher people to their seats, and even to ask a planted question. The contact's job is to head off problems before they erupt.

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Delivery Tactics

Maintain eye contact. Don't make the mistake of staring at a spot on the back wall. Talk directly to people. The best presentation is delivered as a conversation to every person in your audience, one person at a time. If you want them to believe you, talk to every individual, looking each one in the eye.

Establish rapport. Talk about subjects to which your audience can relate. Don't talk down or patronize them. Be yourself; don't pretend to be something you aren't because your audience will see through it.

Repeat yourself. If you want people to remember a particular fact, repeat it at least three times during your speech. The first time, they might hear it. The second time, they might mull it over. The third time, it might stick. How many times did Martin Luther King repeat the "I have a dream" phrase during his famous speech?

Help your audience remember the important points. In addition to repeating yourself, use an anecdote or other story to illustrate a point. Pause just before and after you state a key idea. People find it easier to remember images and feelings. If you want your audience to remember the key points of your presentation, attach those points to images or emotions. Men tend to connect visuals to memory, whereas women tend to connect emotions to memory.

Stay on schedule. Start your presentation on time and finish it on time. Do not repeat yourself for latecomers. If much of the audience is missing at the starting time, be prepared to "start" with a discussion instead of your speech. Those who are there will believe that you began on time, and those who arrive late will seat themselves quickly, feeling a bit guilty for being late. Then, you can start your planned presentation.

Finish on time—even if it means leaving something out. For that reason, always get your important message out early. Never save the key message until the end of your speech. People might leave early, or they might be distracted by then.

Deliver your speech with credibility. If you are the CEO, you have credibility by position. Regardless of your position, you can enhance your credibility by the sources of information you quote. Quote a respected publication. Quote a well-known and respected person. Quote a member of your audience—the benefits of doing your research!

Speaking is only one part of your overall set of communication and leadership skills.

Smile. You look your best when you smile. You look more trustworthy, friendly, and confident when you smile. When you smile, you help improve your audience's confidence in you.

Sound your best. Drinking water before you speak will lubricate your vocal chords. Breathing deeply and slowly will allow you to project your voice and pause when you want to—not when you need to. Speak slower than you normally do. The audience needs to hear what you say, think about it, and internalize it.

Be flexible. Your audience won't know your script. Be ready to adapt your presentation to the audience and the conditions. Be prepared to leave material out. It might be tough on you, but your audience won't know that you omitted or forgot some information. Instead, focus on them and your message.

If something goes wrong—if there's an interruption or a glitch in technology—smile, pause, breathe, and sound confident. Adapt your presentation. Focus on your message.

Finish strong. End your presentation with a strong message. A call to action is one of the best endings to motivate your audience immediately after your speech. Other possibilities include a rhetorical question, a positive statement, or a famous quotation. Never end with, "Well that's all, folks."

Don't make the mistake of finishing a spectacular speech and then opening yourself up to questions. That is a weak way to close. Instead, at the start of your presentation or before you finish, announce that you will take questions for x number of minutes. Do so, then end the questions, and finish with your closing statement. That way, you close on a strong note, not a random question.

Presentation Follow-Up

Review your presentation and grow. Ask a trusted colleague to attend your presentation and give you constructive feedback. Be specific about what you want from him or her; for example, "How well was my point illustrated? Did I connect with the audience?" When you ask specific questions, you will get specific answers. The most important question you can ask yourself is, "Did I make happen what I wanted to happen?" Did they march in the direction you pointed? Were they convinced? If the answer is yes, your presentation was successful.

When someone compliments you on the presentation, be gracious and ask, "What was the best idea or strongest message that you will take away and use?" You might be surprised at what he or she "heard" versus what you "said." The fastest way to improve your presentation skills is to review every presentation you deliver. What worked well? What could you change?

Public speaking is a set of skills, not a talent.

Leverage your presentation. Make your presentation more than a single isolated event. Summarize key points and questions from the presentation in your newsletter and send everyone a note. Perhaps the presentation can be crafted into an article. Speaking is only one part of your overall set of communication and leadership skills. Those skills are meant to help you get done what you need to get done—by yourself and by others.

Consider your next presentation. File your presentation notes so you can refer to them the next time you present. Include in the file your comments on what you thought worked well and what you think needs to improve. Include suggestions on what to try differently next time. Remember, the great masters of golf and music are continually improving their skills. They never rely on talent alone.

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