

Presentation – Excelling or simply surviving?

By Helen Roome

Presentations are an important, but often neglected, element of your skill set. Impressions matter, they are often sub-conscious and they last. At the end of a presentation everyone knows how well you did or didn't do – except you.

If there is one tip you take away from this article, take this one: Come from their angle not yours. It sounds a subtle shift but I promise you it is dramatic. If you listen to hundreds of presentations, as I do, you know how few people put time and effort into thinking about how the presentation will be received by the audience.

Most presenters start from “What do I need to tell these people?” This is natural – it is still a trap I fall into with monotonous regularity. I did when I started this article. The problem with this is that it makes us “brain dump” everything we know about the subject just to make sure we cover anything you just might want to know.

I was coaching a managing director – Peter, who was going to make a speech to a large industry convention dinner. He had been asked to speak on “Multi-level Marketing” and had prepared his speech around a model of Enablers and Constraints. I knew he was a good speaker but during his first run-through I felt nothing, found my mind wandering and even yawned once or twice.

He had prepared thoroughly, mentioning that he had spoken to some of the industry's clients to find out their views. I asked him to talk about some of those calls. He talked enthusiastically about what he had found out, giving snatches of the telephone dialogues. In recounting the memories, he was clearly picturing those conversations in his mind and it brought it alive for me too. He reworked his presentation on the spot to link a number of such anecdotes, summarising each of them with a suggestion to the audience about what this illustrated and what they could do about it. He was thrilled. He had been having difficulty remembering the speech and had depended too much on notes. Now, he said, the speech flowed easily. He had no trouble remembering the anecdotes; he just needed to remember the links and the summaries.

As he gave the speech, I found myself nodding, smiling ... engaging with his ideas. Unlike the first time, he could now connect with his audience – through the anecdotes, which brought his points to life, but also through eye contact now that he didn't have to break connection all the time to refer to his notes. This made him look far more knowledgeable and expert in the subject matter.

So what are the key learning points?

Come from their angle not yours: Instead of starting from what information you want to convey, seek to meet their needs. *What's on their minds? How can you add value to them?*

In the example above, we can safely assume that the audience will be concerned about what their customers are saying. Once they understand the benefit of the suggested solution to them in their world, they will more easily accept your expertise.

When you start from the audience's perspective you will find you flavour your presentation with benefits rather than too many facts. Keep asking yourself "Why would that matter?" to get to the heart of your message.

Focus on what you want them to do as a result of your presentation: Start with a destination document – *At the completion of my presentation the audience will ... (know something, believe something and, ideally DO something.* Too many of my workshop participants, when asked about the outcome they want, say "I haven't really thought or it's only an review, I just want to survive it!" *If you don't know the outcome, why should they listen to you?*

A question I often ask is *"If I stopped a member of your audience as they walked out of the door, what would you want him to have remembered?"* Which would you prefer, "Oh it was some theory about marketing" or "It really made me think, I'm ringing my customers on Monday morning to find out what they want from us"? Your audience will not remember all the detail of your presentation – *they will know if they want to find out more or not.*

Your success criteria should always be *"Do they do something with the information they have received?"*

Create mental pictures for yourself and your audience: Don't tell ... show. Once Peter was visualising the conversations he came alive. He was creating mental pictures – for himself and for me. His voice became more expressive, his face and gestures were more animated and so I responded with nods and smiles. I could understand the context, apply what he was saying to my own experience and so was more likely to accept his solution.

Most of us tend to buy from "gut feel" and then justify it rationally – though we might not want to admit it! We, as listeners, are much more likely to engage with example and anecdote than fact. So, while not substituting style for substance or to disguise illogical reasoning, use emotion to add colour and interest. *Why should anyone get excited about your ideas if you aren't?*

*Facts tell,
stories sell.*

In technical presentations, when there is a strong emphasis on figures, make sure you tell the story behind the numbers. Don't just describe the figures. Without the underlying story, there is no context and the figures have little relevance.

Use analogy whenever there may be non-technical people in your audience (and even often when there aren't!). By comparing the figures to known objects, the audience can picture what it means.

People buy you before they will buy the message: The sooner you

engage with your audience; the sooner they will accept your ideas. You may at times have felt "I don't know what it is, but I just don't get her." I find many presenters feel they must try to imitate other presenters they have seen. That is not say we cannot learn from observing other speakers – it is one of the richest sources of

The Rialto tower	
<i>Boring</i>	<i>Meaningful</i>
90,000 cubic yards of concrete	or <i>Enough concrete for a footpath from here to Edinburgh.</i>
2,500,000 square feet of space	or <i>Space the equivalent of 10 miles of a 4-lane motorway.</i>
42,614 panes of glass	or <i>Enough glass for 2 pairs of sunglasses for each person in London.</i>

improvement. But we have to take the learning and make it our own. Authenticity is priceless. We, as audiences, will forgive any number of presentation flaws if we get the feeling we are seeing the real person. Being authentic and letting your personality show through helps people believe what you are saying.

So to summarise:

Come from their angle not yours
Focus on what you want them to do
Create mental pictures
Be yourself – people buy you before
they will buy the message

Great presenters are flexible. They have the ability to think while presenting and to react to the audience. This means they will adjust the presentation if, for instance, they find a different knowledge level from that expected. Scripting our presentation too rigidly means we cannot connect with our audience. *Speak to the audience you have, not the one you wish you had.*

Think of someone you've enjoyed listening to, who was a really engaging speaker. What fired your imagination? What engaged your interest? Most people say "I felt he or she was speaking just to me." As a speaker, it is you they want to hear from – your experience, your views, your interpretation of the facts, your recommendations.

Make your presentations come to life – genuine, natural and enthusiastic. It is a highly rewarding skill to hone and develop and you will see surprisingly rapid results.

Don't simply survive your presentations, excel.

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