

50 tips for better presentations (Mar 11)

In conducting some research on design for visual aids I came across this set of tips which I developed with my wife Sue some eight years ago now. Rather than see them gather dust, I decided to share them with you. In some respect presentations have moved on – we didn't have Twitter back then – but most of these guidelines still hold true:

Nervousness

1. Don't be concerned if you're a little nervous

Practically all presenters are nervous to a degree, many seriously so. Surveys of the general public consistently show that people regard public speaking as just about the worst thing that could happen to them, so if you feel a little shaky before you take the floor, then you're not alone. The fact is that a few nerves are not a bad thing; they show you're taking the situation seriously and that you're ready to give it your best.

2. Control your nerves by being prepared

The best way to keep your nerves under control is to be prepared. That means knowing your subject, being familiar with the running order and testing your slides and any equipment you will be using in advance.

3. If you can't get properly prepared, say no

If you're asked to make a presentation on a subject that you know little about and you don't have time to prepare thoroughly, you are better off saying no than just winging it.

4. Avoid a dry mouth

If you're getting a bit of a dry mouth waiting for your turn to speak, try sucking a boiled sweet. Just remember to take it out before you start.

5. Keep off the booze

Drugs and alcohol may seem like the answer to nerves, but the result is more likely to be slurred speech, slow reaction and a tendency to believe you are being funny when you aren't.

Getting started

6. Provide your own written introduction

Help out whoever has to introduce you and ensure that what is said about you is appropriate by providing your own written introduction.

7. Pause for a second

Focus on someone near the back of the room and pause for a second. This will gain the audience's attention and encourage you to speak sufficiently loudly.

8. Spare the thanks

Except on very formal occasions, you don't have to thank the person who introduced you or the audience for coming or the organisation for inviting you. Get straight on with it.

9. Make your opening point

Don't respond to a previous speaker's remarks, make a comment about your audience or the location or to something that's in the news. Make your first point relate directly to the purpose of your presentation. The rest can come later.

Body language

10. Stand naturally

Inexperienced presenters get anxious about how they should stand. The answer is to stand naturally, so you feel comfortable. Clasping your hands together in front of you or behind you, like the Duke of Edinburgh, looks overly formal and stops you from being expressive with your hands. When you're not using your hands to make a gesture, keep them at your side. It's not completely out of the question to put a hand in one of your pockets, as long as you're not fiddling with what you find inside.

11. Control leakage

There's a great temptation when the adrenaline is running to pace backwards and forwards (inducing the Wimbledon effect) or rock up and down on your heels (inducing seasickness). The experts call this 'leakage' and it's not a pretty sight. There's nothing wrong with movement as such; it just needs to be done consciously, for a good reason.

12. Don't fiddle

Fiddling is another form of leakage, so put that pen down before you do what everyone's expecting, which is to draw a line across your nice white shirt or blouse. Another common habit is continual grooming, which is a universally understood sign of sexual interest. So, to avoid any misunderstandings, keep your hands below your neck (and, while you're at it, above the waist).

13. Be expressive

Hand gestures are an important element in communication, so use them freely to help you make your point. However, avoid pointing your finger as the effect of this is always negative.

14. See yourself on video

It's a painful process, but an invaluable one. Try out your presentation and have a colleague record it on video. Nothing tells you more about how you look, how you sound and what mannerisms you have.

Voice

15. Step up the volume

It's a common mistake to speak so softly that you can't be heard clearly by all your audience. If you're not sure how loud this needs to be, have a brief rehearsal beforehand and have a colleague sit at the back and provide you with feedback.

16. Slow down

One of the side effects of the adrenaline rush is that you tend to speak much too fast. There's a simple solution and that's to slow down. If it sounds too slow to you, then it's probably about right.

17. Don't act

Unless your accent is so pronounced that people will have real difficulty understanding you, speak naturally as you would normally.

Eye contact

18. Achieve eye contact

Achieving eye contact with your audience is one of the most effective ways of building rapport. Nervous and inexperienced speakers tend to look at their notes, at their laptop, at the ceiling or just about anywhere except at the audience.

19. Include everyone

You want to achieve eye contact with everyone in your audience, not just those at the front or those who are obviously the most interested.

20. Hold eye contact for five seconds

Scanning the audience quickly doesn't count as eye contact; try to maintain eye contact with each person for about five seconds. This will seem like a long time to you, but will have an extremely powerful effect and exudes confidence and professionalism.

Notes

21. Don't script your presentation word for word

If you are presenting a scientific paper, it's possible that you'll read it word for word, but even then the effect on your audience will be painful. Unless you're an actor or a TV presenter, you won't be able to read your words naturally and convincingly, so don't even try.

22. Use your visual aids as a prompt

Now this may sound like a contradiction to everything you've read in the rest of this book, but it isn't. We're not recommending that you fill your slides with bullets that serve as your script, just that you use whatever visual aids you may have as a memory jogger. For most presenters this will be enough.

23. Put your notes down

If you are going to use notes, don't hold them in your hand, where they will flap about and make a noise; put them down in front of you and refer to them when you need them. Some presenters make their notes on small cards and keep them in their hand, but it's so easy for these to get out of order.

24. Make them big and bold

Your notes should be written in big, bold letters because, when the adrenaline hits and the lights dim, you won't be able to read anything else.

25. Keep them short and sharp

A few keywords should be all that's required to ensure you keep on track and don't miss out anything important. However, some presenters script their opening and closing sentences word-for-word and you may find this helpful.

Humour

26. Use humour with caution

Although it may feel good to get a laugh or two, you don't want to come over as a buffoon. Unless you're setting out to entertain or you're a complete natural, use humour with caution or it could compromise your whole message.

27. Be yourself

If you're not the sort of person to crack jokes or come up with witticisms, keep away from humour altogether – you simply won't sound natural and the best you can expect is a little polite laughter. The most natural expression of humour is a simple smile.

28. Don't cross the line

Under no circumstances whatsoever, be flippant or insulting about subjects that could cause offence. You know what they are – gender, race, age, size, religion, politics. Get it wrong and you will die, painfully.

Visual aids

29. Launch your presentation directly

No-one wants to see you load your presentation into PowerPoint and then hunt for the right buttons to launch the presentation full-screen. Save your presentation as a PowerPoint Show and you can launch directly.

30. Don't look at the screen

It looks really unprofessional to look up at the screen every time you change your slide. You should be able to see that the slide has changed satisfactorily from your laptop screen in front of you. Have confidence in the fact that your laptop is still connected to the projector.

31. Don't hide behind the computer

Once you have changed slide, get your hands off the mouse or the keyboard, so they are free to make expressive gestures. The audience has come to see you, not a computer operator. If you're feeling flush, buy a handheld remote for advancing the slides.

32. Leave time for the slide to be absorbed

When you change slide, leave a moment for the audience to take it in before you start speaking. You know what the slide means; they don't. Your adrenaline is telling you to fill every second with words; they require space.

33. Don't read it out loud

All audiences hate it when presenters read out word for word what is on their slides. Assuming you're addressing adults, they'll be able to read quite happily on their own and a great deal faster than you can read out loud.

34. Don't get out of synch

If you have decided on the spur of the moment to make an additional point, have elected to take questions during your presentation or are engaged in a discussion with your audience, it's easy for what is being said and what is on the screen to get out of synch. This is confusing for the audience, so be prepared to blackout the slide (by pressing 'B' on the keyboard), until you are ready to continue. Press any key and the current slide will appear again.

Handouts

35. As a rule, leave them until the end

If you want your audience to concentrate fully on you and your visual aids, distribute any handouts at the end of your presentation.

36. Unless they are essential to the presentation

Sometimes you need your audience to refer to a table or diagram which is too complex to fit on a slide. In this case, you'll clearly need to distribute your handouts in advance.

37. Unless they are used for making notes

Some audiences like a handout containing all the slides on which to make notes during the presentation. The danger is that they'll read ahead and you'll lose their attention.

38. Unless you have an international audience

If you are presenting to an international audience, for whom English is not their first language, then a carefully prepared handout may help them to follow what you are saying. Try printing out your slides and accompanying each with a summary of your points, in whole sentences, not just bullets.

Timing

39. Keep it short

However interesting you are, your audience can only concentrate for so long. Limit your presentation to 15 minutes, 20 at tops. If you're asked to fill a longer slot and really have no choice but to accept, break the presentation up with activities that allow the audience to participate.

40. Don't overestimate what you'll need

Inexperienced presenters dread having too little material to fill the time available. In reality, this almost never happens, and even if it does, finishing early is a benefit not a drawback.

41. Finish on time

Whatever you do, don't over-run, particularly when it's time for coffee or lunch. Have pity on those who are hungry, dying for a pee or desperate for a fag. If there isn't a clock on the wall that you can see easily, place a clock or your watch on the table or lectern in front of you. You could set an alarm to warn you when there's five minutes to go, as long as it's not too loud, or ask a colleague in the audience to signal to you.

Wrapping up

42. Summarise

Audiences have a limited attention span and will remember little from a presentation, so make sure that what they do remember is what is important. Close with a summary of your key points and keep it brief (if you have more than five key points, chances are you need to revise your presentation). You could bring back your best visual to accompany your closing remarks.

43. Tell them what you want them to do

Presumably your presentation has a purpose, so don't sit down until you've told your audience what you want them to do.

44. Be enthusiastic

Enthusiasm is contagious, so let your audience know just how much you are committed to your idea and how excited you are about it.

Questions

45. Leave them until the end

Unless you are experienced at interacting with an audience and handling questions on the fly, you're much better off leaving questions until the end of your talk. Make this clear at the start: "You may have some questions, which I will be happy to answer at the end of my presentation."

46. Leave a little time

When you do ask for questions, leave a few seconds to give the audience a chance to formulate what they want to say and gather up the courage to speak. A few seconds will seem like a lifetime to you, so you must be patient.

47. Have a question for them

If you want to open a dialogue with your audience but yet no questions are forthcoming, have one for them. For example, "How do you feel about my suggestion that we put back plans for our office move for another year?"

48. Repeat the question

With larger audiences, it's a good idea to repeat the question before you answer it, in case anyone missed it.

49. Address your answer to the audience

Look at the questioner while they ask you their question, but then address your answer to the audience as a whole. Otherwise you'll end up in a one-to-one conversation and lose everyone else's attention.

50. If you don't know, say so

Believe it or not, it is OK not to know the answer to every question. Never bluff and blunder; simply offer to come back to the questioner with an answer after the event.

In all other respects, do your own thing!!!

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