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Banish the boredom

By **Jack Downton**

Legal TV dramas have a lot to answer for. Watch any episode of LA Law and you would get the impression that US lawyers have to pass a test for good looks as well as their law exams. It doesn't fare much better in the UK: Judge John Deed gives the impression that all of the London Inns are actually dens of vice. Perhaps the one thing that all legal dramas do have in common is the way they consistently present lawyers as slick, articulate and never failing in their ability to hold an audience captive.

In reality, it's a different story. Most lawyers I've trained - regardless of the size of the firm or the geography - tell me that presenting doesn't come naturally to them, whether to clients, prospects or even within their own firm. Regardless of the size of their audience, some lawyers find presenting to a group of eight people just as daunting as speaking to over 500 people.

No matter how technically brilliant lawyers are at their job, a public performance can be marred by talking too quickly, talking in monotone, getting bogged down in the detail, an obsession with PowerPoint and failing to think about what their audience really wants to hear. Is it any wonder, then, when a speaker looks up from the lectern, that half the back row of the auditorium is nodding off? The good news is that one doesn't have to spend a lifetime being a presentation bore.

Less is More

Lawyers are fascinated by detail but presentations should not be a forum to dump information. Do not begin with the premise that "the more I tell them the more they will go away with". In fact the reverse is true: less is more. This can be partly due to the speaker thinking: "I need to tell them a lot to prove I know my job", and partly on an assumption that because I am interested in the detail, so too will the audience.

The audience doesn't want to know what the lawyer knows. They want to know what the implications are for them.

If you did a quick word association with 'presentation', many would probably cite such words as 'PowerPoint' or 'slides'. While PowerPoint has its place, there is a danger that your audience's attention can wander, even to the detriment of not listening at all.

With slides you need to remember that the audience will not be concentrating on you. If they aren't concentrating on you, they certainly won't remember your key points or be influenced by what you are saying. Who makes the impact? You as a highly competent professional or a highly paid slide operator?

Key points to consider are:

- Use slides sparingly, especially those containing only words. However, a picture is worth a thousand words.
- Ask yourself: "are the slides for my benefit or the audience?" If the slides are really your notes, they have probably got far too much information on them. Your audience will therefore be reading rather than listening (it is not possible to read and listen simultaneously).
- Handing out notes before you speak makes it difficult to hold your audience's attention. Give them out afterwards if at all possible.
- Introduce the slide before you show it, have key points highlighted and give the audience a chance to read the information before talking over the slide.

The critical thing about a presentation is that it is a vehicle for influence, whether winning work or enthusing colleagues in your firm. The problem a lot of people have stems right from the start of their preparation - they are not clear with themselves at the outset what the point is they want to put across.

Overcoming the nerves

For some lawyers, one of their biggest fears when making a presentation is that they will forget their words. Like a bad dream, they will be caught tongue-tied, speechless and their talk will go down as the worst in legal history. They assume that to use notes would appear unprofessional. This was certainly the case for one partner in a large firm in London who was asked to make a series of industry talks, where there would be a number of prospective clients. To overcome the initial nerves he had encountered in his first two talks, we looked at a very powerful form of speaker's notes that he could follow unobtrusively, giving him the confidence to relax and cover his subject matter without worrying that he was going to forget what he wanted to say. After his next and happily, very successful, seminar, I asked him for one thing that had made a key difference. Without hesitation, he said "Notes - and permission to use them"!

Avoid monotone

Perhaps one of the biggest mistakes many people make is to speak slowly in order to make themselves more easily understood. In fact all that speaking slowly does is turn your voice into a ponderous monotone.

The right pace to speak is at your usual pace with your head held up as normal (not buried into your chest reading your notes, as this kills your voice projection). However, what is really important is where and for how long you pause.

There is normally only one person in the room who doesn't like silence during a presentation and that is the speaker. Once you understand that it is okay to pause then much of the fear will go away.

Pause to add emphasis, hold eye contact with the audience to show you mean what you say and allow people to think about what you have said.

The length of these pauses will feel OK for your audience even though the presenter may feel it lasts for an eternity. You can test this by recording a presentation (preferably a rehearsal with a few willing colleagues as the audience) and when you play back compare how long you think you paused for, with how long you actually did.

Making presentations to a foreign audience

Much of the above advice applies to any kind of audience, but there are a number of things to remember when presenting to a foreign audience:

- Be careful not to slow down your words so much that you come across as patronising. You could end up alienating your audience rather than getting them on side.
- Allow your audience to take time to digest your point. Even the best linguists need extra time to assimilate speech not in their native language. So, your pauses need to be even longer!
- Be sensitive to different cultures. Eye contact is considered a sign of interest and sincerity in many western countries. However, be aware when working with people from Asian cultures, for example Japan and China, that direct eye contact may be considered disrespectful and at the very least, uncomfortable for the other person. If in doubt, for example, when speaking to a foreign audience familiar with your own cultural ways, play safe to start with and take your cue from how your audience reacts.
- Avoid idioms and jargon. The English language is full of idioms and metaphors and many will be lost in translation.

Just as it takes many hours to prepare for a case, presentations should demand no less work. Only by working on different techniques can lawyers ever hope to match up to the image of the influential and commanding lawyer on the silver screen.

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