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Presentation powerhouse: It could be you!

By **Jack Downton**

Sweaty palms, shortness of breath and a sense of imminent doom: some people dread giving presentations. Whether your goal is winning new business, motivating employees, connecting with existing clients, or getting buy-in from co-workers, presentations are increasingly important for marketers. As human beings, we communicate best when we are relaxed. But as soon as we come under pressure, much of what makes us naturally good seems to disappear. We often cease to engage; we talk at people; we talk too quickly.

No matter how technically brilliant speakers 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. Mastering a few simple techniques will help you to be more successful in delivering informative and engaging presentations.

Know your audience

With most presentations, the purpose is often to inform and influence. Many, however, tend to take presentations as an opportunity to convey vast amounts of information (rather like a lecture), in the hope that their audience will retain at least some of what was said. For the most part, this has the opposite effect. Your audience will want to hear what is most relevant to them, not how much you know about a particular subject. The audience doesn't want to know what you know. They want to know what the implications are for them.

If they are bombarded with too much superfluous information, they will become disengaged with the entire presentation and switch-off from your messages. The critical thing about a presentation is that it is a vehicle for influence, whether winning work or enthusing colleagues. 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.

Control your nerves

Sometimes nerves can get the better of even the most seasoned speakers and the presentation can be ruined by too many 'ums' and 'ahs'. Nerves are a natural reaction but they can be tamed if you are prepared to deal with them in advance. Often when we are nervous, we speak too quickly for the audience to consider our message, which can hinder our performance. A good way to adjust this is to practise the presentation while recording yourself, so you can play it back and hear how quickly you are speaking. However, Be

careful not to speak too slowly, though, as this can sound patronising and you risk alienating (as well as boring) your audience. If you tend to fiddle around a lot when nervous, practice in front of a mirror to see whether your movement is distracting. If it is just natural body language, however, be careful about tinkering too much with it as you may end up looking unnatural and contrived. Mastering your nerves can make all the difference in giving a presentation that is composed and professional.

Slip and slide

Using PowerPoint in a presentation has a time and a place, and it can often be a wonderful resource, but needs to be used appropriately. The brain doesn't listen well and read at the same time. If you're talking and there's a slide up with text and data, your audience is going to be focused on the slides and not concentrating on you. If they are not concentrating properly on you, they definitely won't remember your messages, and be influenced by your key points. Who have they come to see? You as a highly competent professional, or a series of colourful slides jammed with words and images? You must also ask yourself if the slides are for your benefit or the audience. If the slides are really your notes, scrap them.

If you need to use slides, allow your audience time to take in the information. Sentences should be kept short, with limited punctuation and abbreviations. Keep the colour scheme simple, use minimal animation and a consistent layout throughout. If used, use them sparingly, especially those containing only words – remember, a picture is worth a thousand words! Introduce the slide before you show it, have key data highlighted and give the audience a chance to read the data before talking over the slide (remember they can't read the chart and listen carefully to you simultaneously). Consider inserting blank slides or turning off the projector from time to time so that you can ensure getting audience attention refocused on you.

Interest is everything

Another mistake 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. It is important to speak at your normal pace, with your head held high to promote better voice projection.

It is also important to *pause*. Silence is often feared by the speaker, yet it gives structure to your presentation and allows your audience time to digest what you have said. Pauses, when used correctly, can be the ultimate aid in generating interest and maintaining confidence levels during a presentation. 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. Pausing is not only beneficial for your audience: it also allows you a moment to collect your thoughts, allowing for a composed and collected presentation.

You almost cannot pause for too long! No matter how long you pause for, the length will feel comfortable for your audience even though it seems to last an eternity for you the speaker. 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.

Speaking notes – yes, you’re allowed!

I don’t know where the taboo against speaking notes started, but speaking notes are a great tool for even the most experienced of public speakers. Barack Obama, Tony Blair and Richard Branson all use them during influential speeches. The aim is to deliver a self-assured presentation and speaking notes go some way to giving you the confidence to achieve this.

Using speaking notes keeps your ideas aligned and your presentation on track, especially when you pause for questions or give examples. It is crucial that they are short and sweet – merely prompts for you during your presentation. If you crowd them with words they can become confusing, and may tempt you into reading straight from them – a big faux-pas when it is so vital to maintain eye contact with your audience and be conversational.

Foreign presentations

In many businesses and organisations, presentations to visiting colleagues from offices overseas are not uncommon. This is a situation where knowing your audience is absolutely crucial. In a circumstance where there is likely to be not only a language barrier, but also a cultural barrier, extra care and research is needed to deliver a successful presentation that will be well received, and will not offend the cultural sensitivities of your audience. If language is likely to be an issue, make sure you use body movements to express meaning where words may not be enough. Facial expressions, gestures and eye contact all contribute to this. It is also vitally important to know what cultural values and norms may come into play if you are presenting to a foreign audience. Do your research accordingly, and avoid making jokes or discussing potentially controversial topics. Your job is to inform, not insult.

Pausing also becomes all the more important when you are presenting to a foreign audience, as even the best linguists need some extra time to digest speech not in their native language.

Impact

Remember, your job as a speaker is to hold your audience’s attention, influence them and convey your key points. Impact is crucial and you cannot do this if your audience is too busy reading slides, distracted by incessant movements on your behalf or bored. It is important to rigorously prepare for any presentation you are about to make. This, coupled with the appropriate application of the skills set out above, will help you to dramatically improve your presentation skills.

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