

Making An Effective Presentation

Date published - FEBRUARY 24, 2010

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Original source - forbes.com

Successful presenters understand that what the audience sees in a presentation makes a stronger impact than the words they hear. We've been wired to take in information primarily through our eyes ever since cave dwellers began looking over their shoulders for approaching mastodons.

Academic research demonstrates the importance of nonverbal communication. One study by Albert Mehrabian, professor emeritus of psychology at UCLA, assigns only a 7% value to the choice of words in face-to-face communications, while tone of voice has a 38% value and facial expression 55%. The study was measuring the impact of single words in a laboratory setting, not in a presentation—but should be carefully considered by presenters who agonize over choice of words and give short shrift to preparing their presentation.

There's a different way to break down the components of an effective presentation. Like the Mehrabian formula, this one has three parts and a percentage value for each.

The first—and most important—part is to make an emotional connection with the audience, because without it the presenter's message will not be fully heard. The second is to generate and maintain a high level of energy to hold the audience's attention through the whole presentation. The third is to focus the content on the payoff for the audience.

Many speakers under appreciate these components. Using them can help you improve your effectiveness at presenting by significant margins.

Make an Emotional Connection with the Audience. Consciously or not, the audience forms a bias for or against a presenter within seconds. We all make a tentative judgment about everyone we meet on scant evidence, though we may not admit it because we see ourselves as

rational beings. More than anything else, it's the personal impression you make that determines whether or not the audience accepts your message. You must come across as likable and trustworthy.

The key to being likable is simple: Show you like the audience and they'll reciprocate. Once they like you they'll give you the benefit of the doubt on trustworthiness. You'll get a strong start toward likability if before you begin speaking you take a bit of time to look around the audience warmly, enthusiastically and with a big smile.

Maintain steady eye contact with the audience throughout the talk. If you don't, you will quickly signal that you don't want to be there, that you aren't really committed to your message or even that you're a shifty character. By speaking with genuine feeling you'll make it clear you believe deeply in what you're saying. This will encourage the audience to believe in it, too. Practice the presentation so well that you don't need a script. A script is a barrier against making an emotional connection because it keeps you from making eye contact and communicating your passion for your message.

Show them your humanity. This is particularly important for speakers who have power over the audience. Tell them some stories that reveal your vulnerability and express the values you have in common with them. Everyone loves a story.

The audience has to know that you know your subject. Presenters whose expertise isn't recognized by the audience shouldn't try to establish it by describing their credentials. Let the person introducing you describe them and endorse you enthusiastically.

People like people who are similar to themselves. Be yourself, but also try to fit in with the members of the audience as much as possible. Speak to the audience's level of knowledge. Cite references they recognize and respect. Express the feelings you share with them. Dress just a little bit better than the people in the audience.

If you're announcing unwelcome news, express your empathy with the audience. Talk about specific incidents to show you understand the issues involved and are up to date with the details. If there's an opposing viewpoint, show the audience you understand it and acknowledge the parts you agree with. Keeping silent about the other viewpoint might infer you're afraid to challenge it. If you have to apologize for something, do it without making excuses. Whatever your message, speak directly and

without circumlocution or Dilbert-speak. Make it clear you'll answer questions at the end—so be sure to leave enough time for them.

If there are other speakers, come early, sit in the audience to hear what they have to say and expand on their comments when you present your message. Sitting in the audience helps build a bond between you and the audience members. You also may want to get to the meeting room early and introduce yourself to the audience members as they arrive. This will help you make an emotional connection.

Present with Energy. Capture the audience's attention right away by telling a dramatic story and keep the energy level high all through your presentation. To get them excited about your idea you have to show them your own excitement about it.

Walk in strong, move confidently to where you'll present, stand tall, smile, survey the room and begin to speak, with conviction. Underscore important points with movement: your whole body, your arms, your hands, your head and your changing facial expressions. Vary your voice pitch and pace, using a dramatic pause when you get to something important. Use mostly short sentences, dynamic words, onomatopoeia (“bang!”, “boo-hoo”) and active verbs. The perfect verb or noun doesn't need a modifier. Move closer to the audience at key points. Wade into the audience if it's appropriate. Come to the presentation well rested so you can stay energetic.

Keep reading the audience. If you feel their interest flagging, do something unexpected: Pause abruptly, change your voice level or tempo, bring out a hidden prop, ask a question or involve the audience in an exercise.

Keep it short. The higher an audience's management level, the shorter its attention span. You'll earn points by taking less time than you were given and you'll maintain a high energy level all the way to the end of the presentation.

Spell Out the Payoff for the Audience. If you're presenting information, give lots of attention to describing its relevance and applicability rather than telling every little detail. If you want the audience to accept a change you're announcing, focus on the benefits for them. What's in it for me? every audience wants know. Appeal to the head, with evidence the audience will find credible, and the heart, with inspiring descriptions of the payoff.

The payoff might be crystal clear to you—but never assume it is for the audience. Restate your key points in different ways, with examples and analogies. Make them memorable with sound bites that use alliteration, acronyms or rhymes.

Since the eyes are so important in learning, you'll want to use visuals. But don't let them upstage you because it's you who's the star of the show. Keep the visuals simple and use only a few. Don't make the audience feel they're suffering death by PowerPoint at the hands of a merciless PowerPoint Ranger. Wait until you've established likability and credibility before you turn their attention to the visuals.

The Metrics. What's the relative value of the three components of this approach to presenting? Mnemonic devices are always useful so let's create a formula. Clearly, making an emotional connection by being likable and trustworthy is the most important component, because if you lack it your argument won't be accepted. You might not even be listened to. Let's give it a 50% value.

The other two components—presenting with energy and spelling out the payoff—are equally important. Let's give them 25% each. We now have a 50%25%25% formula for the new approach to making a successful presentation.

What we have altogether are two different but complementary tools you can put to work. Combining them will help you deliver a knockout presentation.

The 7%-38%-55% rule deals with the information the audience takes from the presentation. It will help you remember the importance of nonverbal communication. The 50%-25%-25% formula is about you, the speaker, and what you offer the audience. It will help you remember the importance of connecting emotionally with the audience, keeping the energy high and spelling out the payoff.

Full website reference:

<http://www.forbes.com/2010/02/24/effective-presentation-skills-leadership-careers-rosenthal.html>