

Delivering Knock-out Presentations

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A presentation is an ideal environment in which to promote yourself, your business, or your ideas. You have an audience ready and waiting to hear from you, you can deal with any queries right there and then, and you can give them the tailored information they want to boot. For a presentation to be a success you need to

- speak clearly and fluently;
- hold the attention of the audience;
- leave your audience wanting to know more.

We are not all naturally gifted at giving presentations, but practice definitely helps, as does being prepared to take on-board feedback you receive from audiences, friends, or colleagues.

What You Need To Know

Is there a standard structure I should follow for my presentation?

The best presentations have a good structure, so make sure you have an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion. Also take into account your audience and the context of your presentation: you can be informal, contentious, or even outrageous where appropriate, but remember that your main goals are to convey your key points effectively and engage the audience's interest.

How can I get my presentation off to a strong start?

The introduction to your presentation needs to capture your audience's interest and attention. A good opening also boosts your confidence, because if you start well, the rest should follow easily. Plan your opening words carefully for maximum effect: they should be brief, clear, and to the point. Tell your audience how long you intend to speak, as this will prepare them to focus for the entire presentation. Summarize what you will be discussing, so that they have an idea of how much information they will need to absorb. Presenting your key points in the first few sentences will also help you focus on the task at hand and remind you of the major points of your presentation. If you are new to presenting, you may find it helpful to memorize your introduction: some people find that it helps to settle the butterflies and get off to a good start. Be certain, too, to let your audience know if you plan to interact with them throughout the presentation, or alternatively, if you will hold a question and answer session at the end. Taking all the questions at the end is a good idea if you are nervous, as it means your train of thought will not be interrupted while you are speaking.

What should I do in the main body of the presentation?

Clearly, the key points you want to make during your presentation will dictate the “shape” of the main body. Using short simple sentences will keep your audience’s attention and ensure that your message is being understood. Err on the side of caution and include only one idea per sentence; pause after each one so as to make a mental full stop. You do not want your presentation to sound like a chapter from a dry textbook, so while you will want to use precise language to convey your message, try to keep some sense of spontaneity. Stick to your original plan for your presentation and take care not to go off on a tangent on a particular point, as you will run the risk of losing the overall thread. Add impact to what you are saying by using metaphors, analogies, and images to illustrate points: they will definitely add extra impact to your words and help your audience remember them.

Can you recommend a way to end my presentation with a punch?

Close by summing up the key points you have covered. The closing seconds of your presentation are as crucial as the opening sentence, as they give you an opportunity to really hammer home your points. Think about what action you would like your audience to take when they leave, then inspire them to take it.

What To Do

Practice!

Practice is absolutely the best way to boost your confidence about presenting. Run through your presentation at least twice by yourself and ideally, ask a friend, trusted colleague, or family member to listen in and offer constructive criticism.

Boost Your Message with Your Posture and Delivery

Once you have rehearsed the core of your presentation, you can move on to consider techniques relating to posture and delivery, which can be used to improve the impact of your presentation:

- Maintain strong eye contact and address your audience directly throughout your presentation.
- Be aware of your stance, posture, and gestures without being too self-conscious. Standing up straight will make you look confident and help you project your voice. Fiddling nervously with pens or your hair or clothes distract your audience and make them miss important points in your presentation.
- If you do not sound as if you believe in yourself, your audience will be uninterested. Remember that they have come to learn something, so be authoritative, sincere, and enthusiastic.
- Articulate your words clearly, pronouncing vowels and consonants carefully. An audience usually has no opportunity to ask you to repeat a missed word.

- Be aware of your vocal expression and try to vary volume, pitch, and speed of delivery to underline your meaning, so that you maintain your audience's interest.
- Avoid acronyms that are specific to your business or industry, as you cannot be sure everyone in the audience will know their meaning. If you need to use them, introduce and explain them early in the presentation.

Focus

It is tempting (and, if you are nervous, comforting) to have a full print-out of your speech to hand in front of you; it is better to use cue cards instead, which will show highlights of main subject areas of your speech, and a few key points. Using cue cards helps you remember your key points, but gives you the freedom to talk naturally about them, making you seem more spontaneous than if you were to speak from an over-rehearsed script. You may, however, want to write out the introduction in full on your first card to get you off to a good start.

Finish on a High Note

As you draw your presentation to a close, remember to summarize your key points and whatever else you want your audience to take away with them. You might also want to take a few questions from the audience. .

We all deal with questions differently, but here are some good general pointers:

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- Give your audience an idea of how much time you have for questions. This may be an issue if you are one of several speakers, because if you run late, everyone who follows you will run late.
- If someone asks you a question and you do not have an answer, be honest and tell the person that you will find out the answer and get back to him or her separately. This will save time and prevent you from giving an incorrect answer. Try to respond within two working days.
- If the question is a general discussion point, you could open the question to the floor and perhaps get an interesting discussion going among the members of your audience.

What To Avoid

You don't check equipment

There is nothing more irritating for an audience who have all made an effort to turn up on time, than to have to wait while you struggle to get your laptop to work, or sort your slides out. Make sure you have checked that all equipment is in working order and that everything is in place well before your audience begins to arrive. If you are using a laptop other than your own, make sure it will accept your media and that peripheral equipment is compatible. If you plan to use sophisticated technology, it is a good idea to have an expert colleague on hand just in case.

You speak too quickly

Do not rush your presentation; it is important to take your time. It is easy to rush, especially if you are nervous and want the whole thing to be over as soon as possible, but the audience will find it hard to understand or keep up with you if you talk too fast. Be sure to summarize your main points every five minutes or so, or at the end of a section. This will help to clarify the most important issues for your audience and help them to remember the central issues long after you have finished your presentation.

You don't "draw in" your audience

Be careful not to look at the floor during your presentation or to direct your speech at one person. By glancing at everyone's faces in a relaxed and unhurried way as you make your points, you will draw your whole audience into the presentation. Keeping in tune with your audience in this way will also help you judge if people are becoming bored. If you detect boredom, try changing the tempo of your presentation to refocus their attention.

You're unenthusiastic

If *you* have no interest or excitement in your own speech, then you cannot expect your audience to be interested or excited. Listening to a single voice for 20 minutes or more can be difficult for an audience, so you must try to inject enthusiasm into what you say. Consider including some kind of interaction with your audience in the form of activities or discussion. These can make a presentation more interesting and exciting.

Where To Learn More

Web Sites:

BusinessTown.com: www.businesstown.com/presentations/index.asp

SpeechTips.com: www.speechtips.com/delivering.html