



Powerful presentations

In four steps:

- 1 Know what you want from your audience.
- 2 Tell them a compelling story.
- 3 Illustrate your story effectively (or not at all).
- 4 Practise and perform powerfully.

Presentation has never been more important. Many of us fear the thought of public speaking but, with careful planning, you can banish those butterflies and enjoy giving presentations that inspire your audiences and build your business.

1 Know what you want from your audience

Why am I here?

Don't wait until you arrive to ask yourself this! You need be clear about your desired outcome. For example, is it to pitch your product, secure an investment or business loan, brief your staff or simply to inform, entertain and leave a lasting impression? Start preparing your presentation with your goal in mind.

What's in it for them?

Know who is going to be there and try to get inside their minds. What do they want from you? How can you convince retailers that by stocking your product they will get an edge over their competitors? Or show a potential backer that you seriously mean business? Or persuade your staff that following a new procedure will make their jobs easier or more rewarding? Or keep getting invitations to speak at business events?

Who are they?

Research your audience carefully and be certain of your facts. For example, find out everything you can about a business and its competition.

You should know the appropriate style and language for the audience and be mindful of people's sensitivities - for example, don't tell dumb blonde jokes to a Scandinavian trade delegation.

Think about how you can pleasantly surprise the audience and give them more than they are expecting.

How many of them are there?

Audiences can range from a handful in a boardroom, enabling plenty of interaction, to hundreds at a conference with a sound system and animated graphics. The bigger the audience the less the scope for improvisation - though it is always essential to prepare thoroughly.

tip:

Write a comprehensive list of your audiences' likely objections and have your counter-arguments ready.



2 Tell them a compelling story

We've been telling each other stories since we lived in caves. It's an excellent way to explain ideas and make a convincing case (like Aesop's fables with their moral lessons). When you write your presentation remember that you are telling a story that needs a strong beginning, a coherent middle and a memorable ending.

What is your big idea? Write a one-paragraph summary of what you want to say in your presentation and keep referring to it. Then decide on the ending - which must include a call to action - and ensure that everything else leads up to it.

Your opening remarks should capture the audience's attention and make them eager to follow you on a journey. Tell your story simply and cut out anything that doesn't drive it on to the ending. For example, if you are talking about the development of your business you could split this into three chunks: where we came from; where we are now; and where we want to be.

Be sure to include all the relevant facts and figures but place them clearly within the framework of your story. Watch how business correspondents on Newsnight and other news programmes do this.

Add colour to your story without detracting from your goal. If you sound interested then your audience is more likely to be. Make sure your presentation sounds fresh every time.

Unless you are an accomplished joke teller it is wise to be good-humoured rather than an aspiring comedian. By all means make the audience chuckle - but if they start rolling in the aisles they might be laughing at you!

Often the best way to reinforce a point is to tell an anecdote - a little story within your big story. For example, you might explain how you were inspired to market a new flood protection system by your personal experiences in the recent storms.

You could draw on local or national news stories that resonate with your audience. If relevant, refer to breaking news and show you are on the ball. It doesn't have to be about business or politics - a sports story could illustrate your argument perfectly.

Quotations can also have a big impact.

"I often quote myself. It adds spice to my conversation" - George Bernard Shaw

tip:

Don't use a long word if a short one will do and do explain any acronyms or jargon.

3 Illustrate your story effectively (or not at all)

A picture is worth a thousand words
Your images should help the audience to follow the story and remember your messages. But they must enhance the story and not the other way around. You need to write your story - your script - first.

For a small audience, a flip-chart demonstration or a slide show projected from your laptop on to a bigger screen is enough. The expectations will often be greater for a larger audience and you could create a riveting multimedia display.

But don't risk being naff. An ill-chosen slide or an irrelevant video clip could ruin your show. Whatever you do - however simple - must be professional and impressive.

Imagine how David Brent from BBC's 'The Office' might illustrate your presentation - and don't do it!

Less is more

Give yourself - and your audience - space to breathe. Don't cram too much in. Your slides should reinforce what you are saying and you must allow time for your words to sink in. As a rule of thumb, aim for no more than one slide per minute.

When you have written the text, go back and take words out. 30 words on a slide are probably too many. Five brief bullet points are easily enough. Sometimes just one word will do. Edit it ruthlessly.

Graphs are powerful tools - keep them simple so that your audience can quickly grasp their message. Have a good contrast of colours.

Really get to grips with PowerPoint to get the best out of it. There are useful tips on the Microsoft and other websites. Or ask a designer to help you.

Shock it to 'em!

A story without surprises sends us to sleep. 'Wow' your audience with an unusual fact or curious twist. But make it relevant. For example, a travel promoter might ask:

"Did you know that the world's tallest mountain is in Hawaii?"

And show them the picture.

"Technology makes it possible for people to gain control over everything, except over technology"

Check that everything works beforehand or get ICT service people to do this. Try to leave nothing to chance.

Prepare handouts for your audience to take away, giving them a bit more information than you have shown and talked about. For example, you can put your more complicated charts and statistics here.



Success

tip

Check your visuals for embarrassing typos and irregular fonts.

If possible, get somebody else to check them- it's amazing what they can spot that you have overlooked.

4 Practise and perform powerfully

“All the world’s a stage”

- William Shakespeare

“It usually takes me about three weeks to prepare for an impromptu speech”

- Mark Twain

Practise, practise, practise - this is vital to build your confidence and ensure success. Actors do it. Churchill did it before delivering his momentous speeches. And so must you.

Get to know your facts (but not so much that they bore you) and become supremely confident about your arguments. Then rehearse your presentation from start to finish - in front of family, friends, video camera, Dictaphone or all of these. Accept critical feedback, analyse your performance and improve it.

Use the rehearsals to get your timing right - don't speak for too long.

“There are two types of speakers: those that are nervous and those that are liars” - Mark Twain

Preparation will help you to conquer your nerves... and unleash them positively. Instead of paralysing you, this nervous energy can enliven your presentation and generate a vibe in your audience.

Practise controlling your breathing. Relax your mind. Visualise delivering a knockout presentation... perhaps with your favourite (or most desirable) person in the world watching you.

The key is passion. If you are promoting your own business you have a big advantage over an employee pitching for the company. Think about it. No one believes in what you are doing more than you do - you are putting your life into it. Win the audience with coherent arguments and genuine enthusiasm.

“It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances” - Oscar Wilde

You are putting yourself on show and need to make the best possible impact.

Dress appropriately and don't forget to tie your shoelaces (and polish your shoes).

Become a good body linguist. This will help you to build a rapport with your audience - you want them to like you and do your bidding! It is usually best to stand upright, conveying conviction and confidence. Use hands gestures to emphasise some of your points and give a sense of openness.

Don't turn your back on everyone and do make eye contact with people towards the back of the group.

Don't be afraid to smile. When your audience sees a sincere smile, they will want to smile too. What could be better than looking out on an audience of happy, smiling people?

Above all - work on your voice. Research suggests that how you say something often has much more impact than what you say. Your voice is your key presentation tool, more important than your slides. You need to practise speaking powerfully and persuasively. You should vary your tone to keep a grip on the minds of the audience. Don't be monotonous.

Finally... be ready to have fun. After all that practising, here you are accomplishing your goals. And you can carry your increased confidence into other areas of your life.

tip:

Don't annoy listeners by repeating meaningless everyday phrases.

Know what I mean?.