

Presentation skills

Introduction

Presentations come in many varieties and take place in many different contexts. The presenter may be an insider or an outsider, familiar to the audience or an unknown quantity. The context may be a management meeting, a sales situation or a training programme, among many other possibilities. This paper describes how to prepare and deliver a generic presentation.

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1 Preparing a presentation

Introduction

Preparing a presentation can be very similar to the process of planning and writing a report. It will be necessary to focus on the objectives, the audience, the content and the structure in much the same way. This section outlines how to prepare a presentation, whether it is being done from scratch or will be based on a report which has already been written.

Define the objectives

The most important part of preparation is not to think about what you are going to say (although obviously it is very important), but to be clear what you want to achieve. The question to ask yourself is “What do I want the audience’s state of mind to be at the end of the presentation?” This will provide a basis for deciding upon detailed content, sequence, arguments, etc.

As well as being clear, the objective must also be realistic in terms of the time available and in terms of the audience’s starting point: you can’t usually transform the uninformed into experts or make the cynic enthusiastic in an hour’s presentation.

Focus on the audience

Review what you know about the audience to help you to set a realistic objective and to structure the content and approach. It will help to know:

- How many to expect.
- Their motivation for being there.
- Their expectations.
- Their knowledge of the subject.
- Their interests, attitudes and opinions.
- How they like to receive information.

This sort of thinking will help in the choice of words (especially jargon and technical vocabulary), level of detail, style, use of supporting material etc.

Of course, sometimes you just have to make your best guess about these things.

Decide on the content

What are the main ideas and concepts you want to put across? What factual information, examples, evidence? This may identify information you need to research e.g. to be able to

answer questions you may be asked. It is generally appropriate (and reassuring!) to have a greater depth of knowledge about a subject than is contained in the presentation. Many people find it helpful to start organising the material into priority categories: must/should/could.

With a report which has been already written, this question becomes one of deciding what to include and what to leave out.

Plan the structure

The simplest way of thinking about structure is in three parts: opening / main body / conclusion.

Opening

It is vital to get this right. You need to get the audience's attention and interest and introduce your purpose and message. It is often best to leave planning the introduction till last. There are several options:

- Direct statement: "I'm going to talk about", or "At the end of this session, I want you to"
- Indirect statement: "You may be wondering why I have asked you all to come here this morning".
- Vivid example or comparison: "Last month the following incident occurred....".
- Vivid quotation: "X once said that".
- Statistics: "The current cost of using computers to store information here is....".
- Story: similar to the vivid quotation but generally fictitious and using humour.

Main body of the presentation

You need to think here about sequencing what you want to say so that it achieves its desired effect. Orient the material towards your objective and their interest. The argument needs to build to a conclusion. Classic principles for sequencing would be to move from:

- The familiar to the unfamiliar.
- The simple to the complex.
- The accepted to the controversial.

Details to be given and examples to be used need to be identified. Bear in mind that ideas you want people to remember will need to be repeated, twice or even three times.

Conclusion

This wants to be fairly “snappy” - end with a bang rather than a whimper. Don’t allow the conclusion to simply restate the introduction - but neither should it present new information or ideas. A summary of what you have said together with a punch line is often be ideal.

Prepare a brief

You will probably need to have something to speak from. Ultimately this is a matter of personal preference: prepare whatever form of brief will enable you personally to deliver an effective and natural presentation. Possibilities include:

Script

It is almost always a mistake to read out a presentation which has been written out in full. Written English is more complex, less natural and direct than spoken English. The result usually sounds formal and stilted. It is also difficult to maintain eye contact with the audience. A script or handout with the main points highlighted which is then used to prompt an extempore delivery can work well however.

Skeleton

A sheet or two with the main points in summary form. The introduction and conclusion should be in more detail i.e. more carefully pre-planned.

Cards

Postcards or 6 x 4 index cards can be used instead of paper. Write a few main points on each card large enough to be read at a glance. Number the cards in order in case you drop them!.

Slides

If you are talking to a Powerpoint presentation, the slides may be a sufficient brief if you know the subject well. Supplementary points can be noted on a printed copy.

Prepare visual aids

Prepare whatever usual aids you will need to support the presentation. Some of the main advantages are:

- The visual channel is used to reinforce or supplement a message presented verbally - this increases impact and the likelihood of retention.
- The presentation of complex material is made easier especially statistics, structures, relationships. Some kinds of information only lend themselves to being presented visually.

- They can be used to emphasise key points.
- They can offer interest and variety to a presentation.
- They can offer an aide memoire to the presenter.
- They take attention and pressure off the presenter.
- Increasingly audiences expect visual aids to be used and may feel the presentation lacks professionalism if they are not.

Rehearse

A dry-run of the presentation is the ideal last step in preparation. At the very least rehearse your opening words in front of the mirror, in the car, anywhere.

2 Delivering a presentation

Introduction

This section provides general guidelines on delivering a presentation. The two subsequent sections address the common problem of dealing with nerves and the neglected, but vital skill, of handling questions.

Starting

It is vital to set off on the right note. Your opening should have been carefully prepared and rehearsed. You should know it by heart. Deliver it confidently and strongly (perhaps raise your voice a little). Avoid apology (“I may not be the best person to be telling you about this ...” etc.).

It is usually appropriate to cover basic ground rules: how long you plan to talk for, when you wish to take questions, will handouts or papers be available.

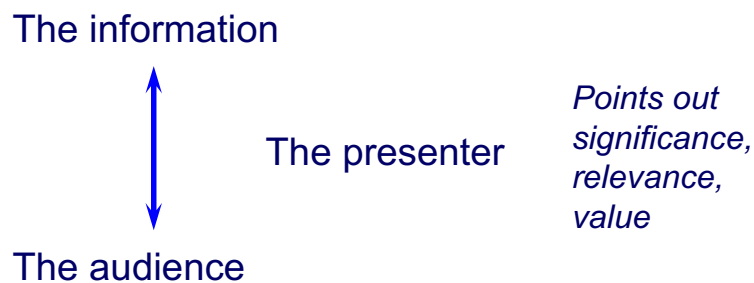
General manner

Be yourself: let your enthusiasm, personality, humour come through. Look directly at individuals and “traverse” the audience. Notice reactions (interest, confusion, disagreement) and notice who wants to ask a question. Be relaxed and confident - beware of off-the-cuff put-downs. If in doubt of whether you are getting the message across, keep going at all costs - let the audience ask a question if it matters.

Don't be the information

Don't simply come out with a string of facts. Particularly if the audience may resist the message: subconsciously they will behave as though if they can kill you they will kill the message. Much safer is to shuttle between the information and the audience as mediator and interpreter: explaining the significance, relevance, value of each bit of information. This can only be done if visual aids are used. The relationship is shown graphically below.

The presenter as go-between



Use visual aids

They reinforce the verbal message, help create a professional image and take some pressure off the presenter. But bear in mind these guidelines:

Talk to the audience

Always talk to the audience, not to the visual aid (nor to the floor, your notes, etc.). This is probably the commonest mistake of all.

Don't compete

Stop talking initially and allow time for the audience to absorb the message, especially if the content is complicated. Most people can't read and listen at the same time.

Don't get in the way

Ensuring that the audience will have an unimpeded view of the visual aids should be part of a pre-presentation check but you may need to watch your own positioning during the presentation.

Posture

Stand, unless the audience is small – but even then standing be more impactful. Stand with feet slightly apart, weight on the balls of your feet, arms relaxed.

Voice

Do not speak too quickly - deliberately slow down if you feel nervous. Vary the pace - slow down or pause to emphasise important points. Pause also to emphasise the structure of the presentation e.g. to mark the transition from one section to another. Vary also the tone and pitch of your voice.

Gesture

Can be very appropriate for emphasis, especially if the audience is large.

Mannerisms

Mannerisms only matter if they are distracting. Move only to make a deliberate point or break - don't prowl backward and forward. Don't fiddle with notes, keys. Catch phrases are generally much more irritating ("you know", "sort of", "yes")

Brief

Having prepared a brief, don't forget to use it. Don't try to conceal it, but don't read it (an occasional glance should be enough if you are properly prepared). Don't be side-tracked by questions and lose track of where you are, but equally don't be so imprisoned by the brief that you can't respond to any unexpected issue or end up covering something twice.

Ending

Signal the end: "Finally", "To conclude" etc. and then do it. Conclude with a positive message delivered in a positive way - don't allow your voice to trail off into nothing.

3 Nerves and self confidence

Introduction

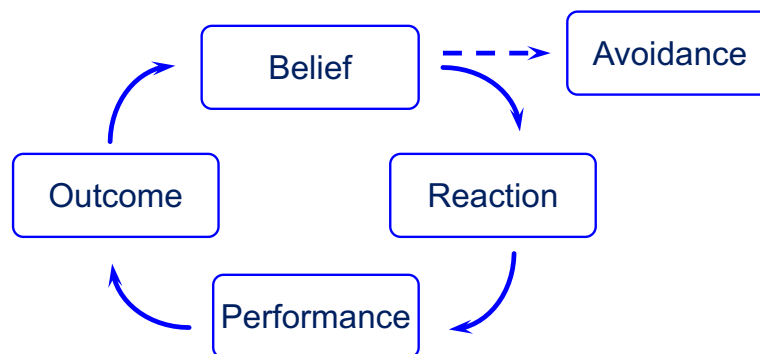
Most people, even experienced presenters feel nervous before a presentation. A degree of nervousness (stress) usually enhances performance by releasing adrenalin and energy which often enable us to “rise to the occasion”. Excessive nervousness is of course disabling and needs to be managed.

This section offers a way of understanding what is going on and some suggestions for dealing with the problems that nerves can cause.

The circular process

A circular process is involved which can be both vicious and virtuous. It can both reinforce self-belief and compound self-doubt.

Belief cycle



The self-defeating version operates like this: you believe you can't do presentations, so you react to a forthcoming presentation as a threat. You approach it with a dry mouth and trembling hands, your head aches, you are sweating. Naturally enough, your delivery is hesitant and unconvincing. You are criticised or fail to convince. You draw the obvious lesson: you were right to believe that you couldn't do it.

If this is the case, the cycle needs to be broken. The most likely way in is to learn the techniques and practice them until performance improves, to notice the results that follow and then to start to re-educate your own attitudes and perceptions. It is also possible to address the perceptions and bodily reactions directly.

Coping with pre-presentation nerves

The following may help:

- Accept your feelings. Talk about how you feel. Think about what will make you personally feel better.
- Be thoroughly prepared and well-rehearsed.
- Arrive early and check out the venue and equipment (see checklist).
- Control your physical state: light meals, no alcohol.
- Last-minute calming / relaxing / tension releasing techniques:
 - Deep breathing
 - Resting with your eyes closed
 - A quiet walk
 - Running on the spot
 - Shaking your arms briskly.
- Control your mental state: remember that the audience want you to make your presentation competently; at the very least they don't want to be embarrassed. They may not like the content but they are on your side in terms of the delivery. Remember also that it is not actually life and death.

During the presentation

- Start by speaking fairly slowly.
- Remember to breathe!
- Use visual aids to help take the pressure and the audience's attention off you.
- Beware of falling into the "low reactor" trap. The people you are speaking will sometimes provide little in the way of feedback as to how they are receiving what you are saying: no questions or comments, no nods and smiles, no encouraging facial expressions. It is very tempting to imagine that this means they do not like it and react by: talking faster (or drying up), jumping around, elaborating unnecessarily. Resist these temptations and carry on as you planned.

4 Handling questions

General guidelines

- Say at the start how you wish to handle questions. Taking them as you go is usually best. It is often desirable to break up a presentation by inviting or posing questions.
- Listen. Make sure you have really heard the question. Be sure to let the questioner finish. Don't assume you know what the question will be about. Ask a clarifying question yourself if you are in any doubt.
- Think before answering. Look over the questioner's head or drop your gaze. Is the question to be taken at face value (e.g. a simple request for information) or is there an ulterior motive. Often enough there is a personal viewpoint or a particular experience or situation underlying the question. It is much easier to deal with the question once you understand why the questioner asked it.
- Make sure everybody else heard the question - restate it if necessary. Explain any jargon or technicalities which others may not understand.
- Use questions as an opportunity to reinforce your message.
- No matter how daft the question, avoid insulting or putting down the questioner.
- Short answers are popular. A simple Yes or No will often be enough especially if delivered with a smile.
- If you don't know the answer don't pretend or bluff. If appropriate, offer to find out and tell the questioner later (but make sure you do so).
- Separate your own opinion from the party line so that your listeners are clear which is which. Sometimes your personal opinions are not relevant.
- Don't fix your gaze only on the questioner. Traverse the audience to involve them in the answer.

Dealing with problem questions/questioners

Irrelevant Answer politely, then return to where you were with a summary.

Sarcastic Don't be drawn, keep your reply light.

Aggressive Keep calm, look directly at the questioner, speak quietly but firmly.

Loaded Confront by asking: what do you think? why do you ask?

Critical Avoid becoming defensive. Let the questioner finish and give a reasoned answer; avoid flat contradiction.